

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

BASED ON THE DVD FEATURING *New York Times* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

MAX LUCADO



Max
OnLife

Answers and Inspiration for Today's Questions

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Based on the DVD featuring *New York Times* Best-Selling Author

MAX LUCADO

PREPARED BY RANDY PETERSEN AND PAUL LANUM



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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“*Every page of the Gospels hammers home this crucial principle: God knows how you feel. From the funeral to the factory to the frustration of a demanding schedule, Jesus understands. When you tell God that you’ve reached your limit, he knows what you mean. When you shake your head at impossible deadlines, he shakes his too. When your plans are interrupted by people who have other plans, he nods in empathy. He has been there.*”

—Max Lucado

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❁ INTRODUCTION ❁

Pastors receive many letters. Writers are asked many questions. Being both a pastor and a writer, I've heard more than my share. And they've shaped my thoughts. Genuine questions have determined my radio messages, sermons, books and this video series.

Trace the ancestry of my lessons to their beginning, and you'll find a humpbacked punctuation mark: "Max, can I ask you something?"

We've created a question mark to highlight our questions. It's stooped and bent, perhaps because questions can leave us in the same shape, burdened and weary. We have deep, heavy questions. We pepper our questions with *whys*, *whens*, *whats*, and *how comes*.

We crave answers. Straighten this mark, and let it stand. Replace the cowering curl with a confident exclamation point. Easier said than done.

Some questions defy easy answers. But you know that. You've been looking. I know that. I've been looking as well.

Like autumn leaves on soil, these wonderings tend to sit and sink in until springtime emerges and I have a thought or two. This Bible Study series collects some of those thoughts.

Many of these answers appeared initially in earlier books. Others are only now being heard. But all of them, I pray, will help you with your questions.

By the way, thanks. Thank you for opening the door to your heartaches and concerns. You've told about your struggles and shared your joys. You've welcomed me into your lives. I am honored to walk the path with you.

After all, aren't we in this together? (Another good question.)



Max Lucado

❁ HOW THIS STUDY WORKS ❁

Life is really complex. We face challenging situations at home, at work, and at church. We struggle in our families, marriages and with our children. And sometimes things happen that just don't seem to make sense. As a result, we have questions. *Why is this happening to me? Where is God during my suffering? Is there any hope?*

In the next 4 weeks, you'll hear real stories from people who are wrestling with some of life's most challenging questions. Max Lucado will take you to God's Word to find some answers to these difficult questions.

In the group discussion after the video, there are questions to help you connect the video to your own emotions or experiences and you will be led through passages of Scripture to grow in your faith together. Throughout the guide, you will find blocks of text, which are quotes taken directly from the *Max on Life* book.

Each week also includes five days of reflective reading. You'll do this part of the study alone during the week, after you have watched the video. You will want to have a Bible and pen in hand. You will find a few special sections spread throughout the readings as well. "Inspiration to Change" will challenge you to reconsider how you think about and act on certain biblical ideas. "In this Together" will give you the opportunity to use what you've learned to make a tangible difference in someone else's life.

Your group may be brand new or have years of connection. Whatever the case, use this *Max on Life* study to take things to the next level. Share from your heart on the questions raised. Be open with each other as you struggle to find answers. Encourage and pray for each other throughout the week. And stay in God's Word.

Knowing God is like mountain-climbing. Some days the path is steep. Others, the trail is easy. Clouds can eclipse the view. The sun might illuminate the peak. Most of all, it just takes time. Know this: God will help you.

—Max Lucado

WEEK

I

✿ HURT ✿



For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

— 2 Corinthians 4:17 NIV



❁ INTRODUCTION ❁

Why do we suffer? It's probably the toughest question we have to face as believers. And it's not just some theoretical quandary for scholars to bat around, but something that touches our lives deeply. If we believe in a God of love and power, why can't God use his power to keep bad things from happening to us? It's a complaint as old as Job.

We've all gone through tough times, and we've all asked the question: "Why me?" It's hard enough to deal with calamity but it makes it even worse when we don't understand why it's happening. In today's video, Max Lucado explores these tough questions.

A lesson like this won't provide all the answers, but it might lead us into a tighter embrace with God.

❁ ICEBREAKER ❁

What do you do in your daily work? What sort of preparation have you gone through to do that? Note that "daily work" involves whatever someone spends most of the day doing. For a student, it's school. For a homemaker, it's the home, or the family. Preparation can be anything—education, past experience, a personality trait, or a lucky break.

✿ AFTER THE VIDEO ✿

We saw two very different real-life stories in the video, though both involved a great deal of personal pain. Rob was accused of something and dismissed from his job, putting his family in a very difficult financial situation. **How would you feel in a situation like that?**

Max zeroed in on the issues of anger and hurt. He suggested three things to do in situations like that.

1. *Change your focus.* It's easy to say, "Let God be your focus," but how can you do that?

2. *Discover why a person behaves that way (their past).* Are we making excuses for a person when we try to understand their past?

3. *Pray for the person who hurt you.* Have you ever prayed that good would come to a person who hurt you? What happened?

Jennifer was struck by a life-altering disease, and she shared her reactions in brutally honest ways. She mentioned some “cutting things, just insensitive things, Bible verses” that Christians said to her. “It’s such a strange thing that scripture can hurt sometimes.” **Have you ever been hurt by people who were trying to comfort you?**

Is there anything you could say to Rob, Jennifer or someone like them that would help?

Read 2 Corinthians 4:8–10. The apostle Paul is writing from his own experience as a missionary. **In what way does Paul “carry around . . . the death of Jesus”? Could we say the same thing about ourselves? How is the “life of Jesus” revealed “in our body”?**

Someone go back and read verse 7. **Why has God entrusted his great treasure to our clay jars?**

Read 2 Corinthians 4:16–18. **How can we “fix our eyes . . . on what is unseen”? How can that help when we are in times of hurt?**

Read 2 Corinthians 5:1–5. What does this passage say about our “purpose”?
What is “this very purpose” (v. 5)?

How could this sense of purpose help us when we go through painful circumstances on earth?

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

(James 1:2–4 NIV)

❁ REFLECTIVE READING ❁

DAY I: NO REVENGE

Blood ran down his forehead and dripped off the end of his nose. He watched as it landed below in a pool of red now forming in the brown dirt. His arms ached. Splinters of wood lodged themselves in the fresh wounds on his back as he slowly slid up the plank, trying to catch his breath.

He gathered his strength, raised his head, and looked out at the faces staring back at him. Some people gawked at his naked body. Others mocked him, calling him names. Down to his left, several soldiers were arguing about who'd get his clothes. People he had never seen before hurled insults at him. "Criminal! Liar! Blasphemer!" they yelled.

Right in front, the priests and leaders responsible for putting him in this disgraceful position grinned with smug contentment. But he was innocent. Not once had his lips spoken falsely. Not once had he acted out of selfish ambition. Not once had he disobeyed God's law.

But instead of putting his accusers in their place, he raised his head heavenward and said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34 NIV).

When someone hurts us, our natural instinct is to hurt them back—to defend ourselves—especially if their outburst is unprovoked and undeserved. But that's not how God wants us to respond. We are called to follow Christ's example.

Read 1 Peter 2:19–25.

Consider the last time someone wronged you. How did you react? How do you think you'd have reacted if you were in Jesus' situation? What do these verses teach us about the importance of the words we speak?

We might be tempted to dismiss this call to follow Jesus by pointing out that he was God, so of course *he* could endure unjust suffering. But Jesus was also fully man. The key to understanding how he could endure this kind of abuse is found in his purpose, for Christ endured the humiliation of the cross so that he could extend grace and salvation to us. How might you endure suffering and thereby demonstrate God's grace to someone this week?

“Never, never have I seen such love. If ever a person deserved a shot at revenge and had the power to do some serious supernatural damage in the process, Jesus did. But he didn't call down armies. He called down grace. He died for them.”

—Max Lucado

DAY 2: IT'S WORTH IT

Few things tax a woman's body like pregnancy. Soon after hearing the good news, you're as sick as sailor in a cyclone. Your body starts to expand in gravity-defying proportions and your skin begins to stretch farther than your budget. You walk the aisles of the grocery store on swollen feet looking for chili cheese-flavored corn chips—and you don't even like chili—while children stare at the unusual shapes the alien in your abdomen is creating through your clothes. And then at 2 a.m., after shopping online at Land's End for a new wardrobe, you finally begin to drift off when a circus erupts in your stomach.

Then there's the pain of delivery, that first diaper change, and nights of even less sleep. As you warm her 4 a.m. bottle, your whole future blurs before your eyes—brawls over makeup and short skirts, sneaking in late through the bedroom window, and the pain of watching her go off to college where you can't protect her anymore. At some point you wonder why anyone ever bothered to reproduce.

But then, those tiny fingers curl around yours and the crying subsides as a little miracle falls asleep on your chest. Soon, pureed peas get used as hair conditioner and your home is filled with innocent laughter. Before you know it, she's off to her first daddy-daughter dance after catching the game-winning pop fly. And then you realize—it's all been worth it.

While not everyone experiences the pain of childbirth, we all endure hurts and heartaches of one kind or another. Jesus was well familiar with the suffering people face and began the Sermon on the Mount by reminding us of the eternal rewards that await those who endure persecution for him. One day, we too will say, "It was worth it."

Read Matthew 5:1–12.

Jesus says nine “blessed are” statements in this passage, and at least three of them directly involve some sort of human suffering. What might that proportion indicate about normal life? What pain are you experiencing right now? And what promise can you see in these verses?

Contrary to expectation, Jesus instructs us to “rejoice and be glad” when we endure hardships (verse 12). How does his promise of “great reward in heaven” color the way you see your current condition? Take some time to write out below an honest prayer to God about how you feel in your present circumstance. Consider how you might use these verses to encourage someone you know who is grieving or oppressed.

INSPIRATION TO CHANGE: LOVE IS NOT A FEELING

Jesus was radical. Everywhere he went on earth he challenged the conventional thinking of the day—and of ours! On one particular incident he dropped this bomb, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27–28 NIV).

It’s easy for us to read those words and agree in our minds, but it’s a whole different thing to put Jesus’ teaching into practice. In Luke 6:27–36, Jesus provides several concrete things we can do to “love our enemies.”

As you go through the list below, it may help to think of someone you are struggling with right now. But before you do anything, ask for God’s guidance. Loving your enemies doesn’t come naturally; it requires supernatural strength.

- *Pray:* When was the last time you prayed for that overbearing boss or temperamental neighbor? How about the police officer who gave you a speeding ticket?
- *Give Freely:* Who owes you money? Could you cancel their debt? Tell them they don’t have to pay you back; it’s a gift. Or, generously meet a need of someone with whom you are at odds. Try and do it without them knowing.
- *Do Good:* Are you and your neighbor not on speaking terms? Take them a meal. And the lady that cuts in front of you at the gas station—surprise her by paying for her gas.
- *Turn Your Cheek:* Has a co-worker been taking credit for your work? Let it go. Did someone in your small group criticize your cooking, again? Resist the urge to retaliate.
- *Bless:* It hurts to hear someone say unkind or untruthful words about you. Instead of returning insult for insult, find something kind to say to them—something that will encourage and build them up.
- *Love:* Treat others the way you want to be treated. How would you feel if your “enemy” approached you and apologized? What if they offered to make amends, no matter the cost? Now stop thinking, and do it.

DAY 3: FORGIVENESS

Our Father which art in heaven,
 Hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come,
 Thy will be done in earth,
 as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts,
 as we forgive our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil:
 For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
 and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:9–13 KJV

Children often learn the Lord’s Prayer as one of their first assignments in Sunday school. It’s so familiar that many of us can recite it by memory. But how often do we pause to consider its meaning?

Nestled in the middle of the prayer, Jesus inserts a profound truth about forgiveness. It’s so important, that Jesus takes a moment to clarify his thoughts before moving on. In Matthew 6:14–15, Jesus tells his disciples, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

At first glance we might conclude Jesus taught that in order for us to experience God's forgiveness in salvation, we must forgive others. But the Bible is clear that salvation is a gift of God's grace by faith, and our works play no part in it (Eph 2:8–9). In addition, when God saves us through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, he forgives all our sins—past, present, and future (Col 2:13–14; 1 John 2:2).

Instead, Jesus spoke about our ongoing relationship with God. If we refuse to forgive others, then our relationship with God is hindered. Our unforgiving attitude accentuates our lack of appreciation and understanding of how much God has forgiven us. But when we realize the significance of our sins against God, and the high price he paid to redeem us—the death of his Son—we are compelled to forgive the offenses others cause us, which by all accounts are trivial in comparison.

“Forgiving others allows us to see how God has forgiven us. The dynamic of giving grace is the key to understanding grace, for it is when we forgive others that we begin to feel what God feels.”

—Max Lucado

Read Matthew 18:21–35.

First-century rabbis taught the Jews that they needed to forgive someone who committed a repeated sin against them three times, but no more. Peter radically suggested pushing that limit from three to seven. But Jesus responded that forgiveness has no limits. Think about your own life. Are there areas where you've created "limits" to your forgiveness?

While this passage challenges us to freely forgive others, it also reminds us of God's limitless forgiveness toward us. *We are* the servant, begging before the king for mercy. Start each day this week by thanking God for "canceling" your debt.

DAY 4: NO STUNT DOUBLE

Have you noticed that in action-adventure movies, the hero and villain can fight forever in grueling hand-to-hand combat—absorbing devastating blow after blow—and yet still remain standing? In Hollywood, actors work with stunt doubles, fight choreographers, and skilled makeup artists who apply the minor cuts and scrapes they appear to receive during combat. But in reality, most fights are over quickly since the human body can only withstand a certain amount of pain.

You get that same “no way!” feeling when you read what the Apostle Paul endured in his lifetime. Paul was beaten up repeatedly, near death constantly, flogged five times with thirty-nine lashes, caned three times, stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked three times, and abandoned in the open sea for a night and a day. He endlessly warded off robbers and enemies who sought to destroy him, was sleep deprived and hungry, and was often left exposed to the scorching sun and freezing winds (2 Corinthians 11:23–27). And Paul didn’t have a stunt double. If there was one thing he knew, it was suffering.

Yet even in the middle of all this torture, Paul wrote, “The sufferings we have now are nothing compared to the great glory that will be shown to us” (Romans 8:18 NCV). As difficult as it is to endure present day hardships, God promises that when we stand before him in heaven, all our earthly troubles will seem inconsequential compared to the glory that we share with him.

Read Matthew 10:16–31.

Like Paul, the other disciples Jesus sent out also experienced great suffering. That doesn't sit well with us. We run from suffering. We crave comfort. But what do these verses suggest that we should expect if we follow Christ? What do verses 24 and 25 tell us about one reason why we suffer? And how should we react (verse 26)?

Even though we experience pain, Jesus reminds us that God cares deeply for us and is in total control of every situation on earth, right down to the moment when a small bird flies its last. How does realizing that God knows and commands every detail—including the abundance or absence of hair on your head—change the way you view your current distress? This week, memorize Matthew 10:28–31. Take a moment and write it out below. Recite it to yourself when you feel your trust in God begin to wane.

IN THIS TOGETHER: COMFORT OTHERS

Their brother, whom they dearly loved, was terribly ill. Since they knew Jesus cared for him, Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus to come quickly. But just after the messenger left, their brother, Lazarus, died.

They carefully wrapped his lifeless body in strips of cloth and with the help of several men from their town they laid Lazarus in a tomb. Grief pierced their hearts. But there was still hope, since Jesus was bound to come as soon as he heard the bad news.

A day passed.

And then another.

Lazarus had been well liked in the Jewish community and many people had come to help comfort Mary and Martha. But one person was notably absent, which made their grief even more unbearable.

Jesus finally arrived after Lazarus had been dead for four days. He saw Martha first, since Mary was too distraught to leave the home. After he spoke a few comforting words to Martha, Jesus asked about Mary.

As Mary reached Jesus, she fell weeping at his feet. He looked down and saw her pain. He looked around at all the people who were there sobbing with Mary and Martha. And then Jesus wept.

What's remarkable about Jesus' reaction—that he paused to grieve with the others—is that he already knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Days before he returned to Bethany, he told his disciples that he would bring Lazarus back to life (John 11:11). And yet Jesus doesn't march in and tell everyone to dry their eyes and stifle their sniffles. With deep compassion, Jesus joined in their pain and mourned the loss of this dear brother.

Is there someone you know who is in pain? This week, follow Christ's example and comfort someone who is hurting.

Maybe you are struggling yourself. But reaching out to someone else will put your woes into perspective. Maybe you don't know what to say. That's okay. Just sit and listen.

You might be tempted to preach to this person all the tremendous truth you've learned in this lesson this week. Don't. It is usually enough to *be with* a suffering person, to *listen* to them, to *show you care*, to *pray* with them (if they want, and keep that simple too). If there are words you need to say, pray that the Lord will guide you to say them.

The Lord is a shelter for the oppressed,
a refuge in times of trouble.

Those who know your name trust in you,
for you, O LORD, do not abandon those who
search for you.

(Psalm 9:9–10 NIV)

DAY 5: CRASH LANDING?

Colossal earthquakes. Tsunamis that decimate entire towns. Nuclear radiation. Hate crimes. Human trafficking. Wars in the Middle East. Suicide bombers. One look at earth today and you're convinced the pilot has abandoned the plane and we're all headed for a disastrous crash. But it isn't so.

Scripture confirms that God is in control (Isaiah 45:9–19). He not only created everything in existence (Hebrews 11:3), but he also controls the weather (Psalm 135:5–7), rules over the nations (Psalm 22:28), and decides when, where, and how long every person will live (Acts 17:24–28; Psalm 139:16). In fact, God commands it all (Psalm 103:19).

Yet as we sip our coffee and scan the headlines, we struggle to understand why God allows such rampant evil to persist. Why doesn't he stop all the senseless violence? How can a loving God allow such tragedy? Why does it seem that wickedness is winning?

While we may never find answers that completely satisfy all our yearnings, our future is certain. The Book of Revelation confirms earth's final destination, and the destiny of all who believe in Christ Jesus. Even though, as passengers, we don't completely understand all the intricacies of the flight plan, we can still trust the Captain to bring us in for a safe landing.

Read Romans 8:18–39.

As we look around at the world, things look broken. They looked broken to the Apostle Paul too. Two thousand years ago Paul wrote that all of creation groans under the consequences of sin and eagerly waits for God to put things right. Take a moment to consider what life will be like once God rights all the wrongs and redeems the universe. How can this hope change the way you live today?

Paul assumes that life will be filled with trials (verses 35 to 39), but is confident that we will emerge as conquerors. Paul assures us that nothing, including future events, will separate us from God's love. What guarantees our ultimate triumph (verses 32 and 34)? What are the implications of God adopting you as his child (verse 23)?

“From our perspective, the world looks like chaos. From God’s, it’s all going according to schedule. From our perspective, evil is center stage. From God’s, evil is taking a selfish bow during its final act.”

—Max Lucado

