

“Practical Hope and Healing for Tough Times”

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**By Chris Carpenter
(interviewing Max Lucado)**

ST. LOUIS, Mo.—What do you say when you are told your child has six months to live? What do you do when you learn your job has been eliminated due to corporate downsizing? How do you react when you learn your spouse wants a divorce? These types of questions are endless, but the answers are not.

Best-selling author Max Lucado has been asked many of these same questions over the years in his role as a pastor. While he believes there are no easy answers or magic-bullet solutions, Lucado offers encouragement to those living a life of dashed hopes and dreams in his latest book, *You’ll Get Through This.*”

I recently sat down with Max to discuss how the life of the Old Testament’s Joseph models many of the difficult situations people face today, how God guides people in times of crisis, and why avoiding anger and bitterness could be the key to getting through seasons of despair.

There have been many attempts by Christian authors over the years to write a defining work on “why bad things happen to good people” some good, others not so good. For you, what led you to write *You’ll Get Through This*?

Well, it’s a really good question, because I’ve written a lot of books through the years, but I think this one, if it separates itself from any of the others, it really is a book I wrote as a pastor. I’ve been at the same church since 1988. I’ve often felt like I wish I had one book I could give to the person who’s just really in the pits that would help them get through a tough time. I’m often frustrated as a pastor because there’s just not enough time to sit down and talk to everybody who’s going through a hard time. And I’ve been looking for years for a book that would really just give people good, sound, theological hope without overdoing it. I wanted to write a book without a “somewhere over the rainbow” promise, but without being so negative at the same time. I was trying to find that balance. This was just my attempt at creating that kind of book.

In *You'll Get Through This* you write about Joseph from the Old Testament, a man who certainly had to overcome his fair share of adversity in life. He is a great person to key in on as his troubles began early in life and were prolonged for decades. Why did you decide to write so extensively about Joseph?

His problems are so much like ours. It's rooted in family issues—what a weird family, the dysfunctional family of Jacob. But then he's not completely innocent, either. The story opens with him telling everybody how they're all going to bow down to him someday. Well, that's not going to win you any friends either. And so it's a complicated thing. He gets thrown into the pit when he's about 17, and the best we can determine, he's at least 29 by the time he appears before Pharaoh. So there's about a 12- or 13-year period where he's either working in the household of Pharaoh or in prison. In either case, he's abandoned. In both cases he's been sold into slavery, and in both cases he's thinking, how long is this going to last? This book is written to help people who find themselves in that period of time, to not give up and to not despair. Of course, the story goes along after, and the book unpacks the difficult reconciliation with his brothers and ultimately seeing his father. It's a wonderful story, and the story of Joseph is helpful because it does end positive. Even though there's 12 years of really difficult times, there's several decades afterward where he's having great influence on the world and enjoying God's favor.

You write in your book that, "Just like Joseph, life in the pit stinks. I don't know anyone who likes life in the pit. But being in the pit can also have a positive effect on your life." Can you outline a few examples of this?

Sure. Here's the big deal for Joseph. He gives us his own life verse in Genesis 50:20, when he says to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." He's basically saying, I think, you really were going to destroy me, but God took your very evil acts and He removed them, He re-intended them into something good. Here's the promise for people going through a hard time: God can use this mess for something good. Whatever you're going through, the reason we don't give up, the reason we don't throw in the towel, the reason we don't do stupid things, the reason we try to hang in there is because we *believe*. We have this conviction that though it stinks, life in the pit will do something, and it will at least cause me to look up. When you're in the pit, you can only look up. It will at least cause me to look toward God and invite Him to help me. My concern is that when people are in the pits, they do things that make it even worse. The Survivor's Creed (contained in the book) has the phrase, "Don't be stupid. Stupid never fixes stupid." And one of the things that I've done in my life when I'm in the pits, I'll say something I'll regret, or I'll try to find a short-term solution to a long-term problem. This is real common, and we've got to help people during these tough times to not make stupid decisions, just to hang in there until a solution comes.

How does knowing God in times of crisis help someone in their life?

What a great question! In preparation for this book, I interviewed people who have gone through a terrible crisis, and of course it's not hard to find, they're everywhere. One of my favorite interviews was with a radio personality named J.J. Jasper. He and his 4-year-old son were in a dune buggy when it flipped. His son died. So he had to call his other children and tell them (about what happened to their brother). I thought it was so helpful, when he told them the news. He said, "Think about all you know that is good about God and hold on to that." And I think clinging to the character of God is the principle I took out of that, because when we go through a crisis, we tend to reinterpret God. We tend to say, "Okay, either God is absent or God doesn't care, or God is weak." We draw these false conclusions. So in a time of crisis, let's do this, let's make a list of all we know that has not changed about God, and let's hang on to that. We cling to the character of God and in the time of change, we hold on to His unchanging hand, and I think that really helps.

Many people are quite adept at quoting Romans 8:28 whenever something is not going as well as it could. How does this verse fit within the context of getting through a rough spot in your life?

I'm very sensitive to somebody using a kind of a trite, quick band-aid, so we've got to be careful about what this scripture verse says. "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose." It doesn't say everything is good, because it's not. I've had heart surgery; that wasn't good. I talked to a lady two days ago whose son attempted suicide. Well, I'm not about to sit down with her and say that's good, it's all good. It's not. It's terrible, and God hates that as much as I do, even more so. I think the message of Joseph and the message of us is, ultimately, God can work all this to good. It's the collective cooperation of all of this that makes something good. I'm not one to ever dismiss the misery that comes with life. You and I have both sat down with people who spend their life in a wheelchair or their children are killed in a car wreck. Forgive me if I ever leave the impression of saying that's good. I do believe that either in this life or the next, it might not be until the next, that through God's grace we'll say, okay, that was terrible, it stunk, it was miserable, but now I see how God used it for good.

I'm sure that as a pastor you have heard this over and over again through the years. Often, people are impatient in waiting for things to happen in God's timing. For these folks, God's timing translates to six months. When what they were praying for didn't happen in their prescribed amount of time, they become bitter and angry at God. Why is avoiding anger and bitterness so important in going through hard times?

Boy, you're nailing it. I can remember having a house on the market, saying, "Lord, You just sell this when You're ready." I was ready, though, at the end of the prayer. I didn't realize that I was actually telling God what to do. It took

forever to sell that house, and I don't know why. I'm wondering if God was just saying, "Okay, trust Me." And sometimes we will wait, and wait, and wait, and when it finally happens, we think, "Why did it take so long?" Again, the story of Joseph is the classic here. He's in prison for two years. What was going on in there? Part of learning to trust is trusting God's timing. I don't think "waiting on the Lord", which is a real common phrase of the Bible, means that we just twiddle our thumbs and do nothing. I think we do everything we can while we're waiting, but waiting really means hoping in the Lord. You need to say, "I'm doing my part, but I'm hoping in You, I trust You ultimately and I'm not going to get bitter and angry, even if it kills me."

As an author, what's your greatest hope for *You'll Get Through This*? Obviously, you want people to read it but beyond that is there something greater?

What I hope this book achieves is that someone who's passing through a time of terrible challenge will, in a moment, when they're almost giving up, will hope for one more chance and not throw in the towel. Sometimes that's all we need—just one voice. I'm envisioning a person who can't sleep, getting out of bed in the middle of the night and somebody gave them this book, or it came in the mail and they finally decide to look at it. And just maybe that phrase, "You'll get through this," will be enough to keep them from doing something that could make matters worse. That would be my hope.