The Church Experience Workbook

3:16

Max Lucado

With learning activities and leader guide by
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LifeWay Press®
Nashville, Tennessee
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Introducing Max Lucado

Since 1985 this Texas pastor has taken pen to paper, sharing his heart and his stories with readers around the globe. His books have been translated into more than 28 languages worldwide.

Max is one of the rare authors who can craft memorable books for readers of all ages, races, and creeds. He has written best-selling books for both children and adults, from illustrated storybooks to nonfiction and biblical commentary.

Yet all these books and products find their wellspring in a single source: the pulpit at Oak Hills Church in San Antonio, Texas. All of Max’s books for adults have been birthed as sermons for the congregation at Oak Hills Church, where he has served for 20 years.

Max and Denalyn Lucado celebrated 26 years of marriage in August 2007. They served as missionaries in Brazil before coming to San Antonio, where they have lived since 1988. Their three almost-grown daughters (Jenna, Andrea, and Sara) recall no other home. Both the heart and the pen of this pastor/writer have found fertile ground under the Texas sun.
Welcome, friends.

We’re beginning an exploration of one of the most important verses in the Bible. Before we dig into these words of hope, let’s take a quick overview of this workbook. My friends at LifeWay have developed this curriculum for you to study with family, friends, and neighbors or with others at your church. Our goal: to understand the message and apply the truths of this verse to your life. Here’s how the study works:

At the beginning of each week, you’ll get together with a small group to view a video message on a portion of John 3:16. Following the message, your small group will be guided to respond to what you’ve heard. During the week, five daily devotionals will help you review that message, go deeper in your understanding, and apply it to your daily life. You will want to complete the devotional studies on your own before your next group meeting. Each day you will:

1. Use the activities suggested. Their purpose is to help you learn and integrate the message into your life.
   Review the elements in this book listed in the margin on this page. Look at the sample on the pages indicated.
   When you’ve finished, place a check mark in this box: ☒

Ponder your own life and how you relate to John 3:16. Those who will study this message fall into two categories. Some have

Examples of the Study Elements in 3:16 The Church Experience

1. DVD listening guide (top of p. 9)
2. Small-Group Response, where you’ll discuss what you heard (bottom of p. 9)
3. Preview of the week (both the focus in John 3:16 and highlights from the study, p. 10)
4. Daily devotionals (like day 1 on p. 11)
5. A prayer activity at the end of each day (bottom of p. 13)
6. 3:16 Prayer List (pp. 152–53)
7. Leader Guide with session plans for your group (pp. 154–69)
8. Review of the previous week’s content (p. 26)
already believed in Jesus Christ and have accepted His free gift of eternal life. For others, learning about Jesus and His message of salvation is a new experience.

2 Read the 3:16 promise in the margin. Which category would you use to describe your relationship to the John 3:16 promise? Check one.

- a. I’ve already believed in Christ and deposited the 3:16 promise in my heart.
- b. I’ve not yet believed.

If you checked a above, the assignments in “The 3:16 Life” (pp. 133–51) will lead you to identify the ways Christ has made a difference in your life. The lessons will guide you to prepare and tell your 3:16 story. People you know and love need to know that John 3:16 is not just a two-thousand-year-old message for Nicodemus. It’s alive in your life and can be in theirs. You’ll be inspired by hearing others in your small group tell their 3:16 stories.

If you checked b above, studying John 3:16 will help you grasp the power of God’s love and His purpose for your life. Choosing faith in Christ and following Him is the most important decision of your life. Our prayer is that God will reveal Himself to you in such a way that you will one day believe in Christ. Special activities in “The 3:16 Life” will help you think clearly and honestly about the significance of this verse.

Now let’s begin our journey in New York City, where I’m introducing 3:16—the numbers of hope—to some great folks in The Bronx.
“For God so loved the world ...” (emphasis added). The fourth word in our parade of hope is loved. In our video time together we discussed two of the terms God employed to describe His love.

God loves us with a love that means He binds, or tethers, Himself to us. When the Hebrews heard Deuteronomy 10:15, they heard God say “The Lord binds [hashaq] Himself to His people.” I told about a mom connected by a child harness to her rambunctious five-year-old.

When you think of being tethered or bound to God, what ideas come to mind? Check all that apply or write your own.

- Big Brother
- Security
- Connected
- Loved
- Other: _____________________________________________

What part of being tethered to God gives you comfort and what part of the idea troubles you?

Comforts me: ______________________________________
___________________________________________________

Troubles me: _______________________________________
___________________________________________________

**HASHAQ**

Hebrew word meaning “to be tethered to, attached to”
Do you remember a time when the tether of God’s love pulled you out of harm’s way? If so, record it below.

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

Do you recall a time when God allowed you so much rope on your tether that you suffered negative results? If so, how does that affect your feelings about God’s love?

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

GOD CHOOSES TO LOVE YOU

In the New Testament *hashaq* is replaced with the Greek *agape*, but the meaning is equally powerful. “God so *agapao* the world.” *Agape* love is less an affection, more a decision; less a feeling, more an action. One linguist describes *agape* love as “an exercise of the Divine will in deliberate choice, made without assignable cause save that which lies in the nature of God Himself.”³ God’s *agape* love does not mean an absence of intense feelings. It means God does more than simply feel warm emotions for us.

Mark the following true or false based on God’s *agape*.

___ 1. God loves me because I’ve impressed Him.

___ 2. God has chosen to love me in spite of my past because His nature is love.

___ 3. *Agape* means God doesn’t feel strong emotion for me.

___ 4. *Agape* means God feels a full range of emotions but acts in a loving way toward me.

How do you react to the idea that God loves you just as much, no matter what you do?

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

AGAPE

Greek word for love that is less affection and more a decision, less a feeling and more an action

(#5 answers: 1. false; God’s love is unconditional; 2. true; 3. false; God feels but does not allow His behavior to be governed by His feelings; 4. true)
Love is active and at work. As you read the following verses, underline what love does or how God uses love in our lives. I’ve underlined the first one for you.

1. “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:12-13

2. “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us… God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:5-8

3. “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38-39

4. “I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” Ephesians 3:17-19

5. “We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” 1 John 4:16-18

(Phrases you might have underlined in question 7: lay down his life, poured out his love, demonstrates, separate us from, rooted and established in, surpasses knowledge, rely on, made complete, is no fear, drives out fear)
8 Draw a star beside the Scripture on the previous page that for you is the most meaningful description of God’s love. Draw a circle beside the one most difficult for you to believe. Briefly explain why in the margin beside each.

9 Read aloud the following quotation by C. S. Lewis. He was commenting on 1 John 4:16-18 (p. 40).

“Perfect love, we know, casteth out fear. But so do several other things—ignorance, alcohol, passion, presumption, and stupidity. It is very desirable that we should all advance to that perfection of love in which we shall fear no longer; but it is very undesirable, until we have reached that stage, that we should allow any inferior agent to cast out our fear.”

10 What substitutes for love (if any) have you used to cast out fear in your life (for example, ignorance, alcohol, passion, presumption, stupidity)?

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

Your goodness can’t win God’s love. Nor can your badness lose it. But you can refuse it. You can resist it. We tend to do so honestly. Having been Plutoed so often, we fear God may Pluto us as well. Rejections have left us skittish and jumpy.

Here’s where I appeal to you. Don’t settle for substitutes. Nothing can do for you what God’s love was intended to do. Mark it down: God loves you with an unearthly love. You can’t

GOD’S LOVE …

1. You cannot win it.
2. You cannot lose it.
3. You can refuse it.
win it by being winsome. You can’t lose it by being a loser. But you can be blind enough to resist it.

Don’t. For heaven’s sake, don’t. For your sake, don’t.

“Take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:18-19, MSG). Others demote you. God claims you. Let the definitive voice of the universe say, “You’re still a part of My plan.”

YOUR CONVERSATION WITH GOD

As you consider the depth of God’s love, recall the times when you sensed God expressing His love toward you. You may not have even known it at the time. A sunset, a sudden brief encounter of grace, the smile of your firstborn child … celebrate those small epiphanies of divine love. Worship the Author of great love.

Lord Jesus, Lover of my soul, I tend to compare Your love to the love of people, and I forget that Your love is broader, deeper, stronger, and greater than anything I will ever experience. Indeed I have been loved—but not like this. I want to learn how to love people the way You so love me. Let this resounding love shake the foundation of my world. May Your love devastate the walls I’ve built to keep me safe. I surrender to love. Thank You, Jesus!
“I saw a woman today who finally became hard as wood all over.” French physician Guy Patin wrote these words in 1692, the first clinical description of fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, or FOP. He unknowingly introduced the world to a cryptic disease that slowly, irreversibly turns its victims into a mass of solid bone.

Healthy skeletal systems are hinged together with ligaments and tendons. FOP, however, hardens the soft tissues rendering the body an ossified suit of armor. Injuries often trigger the FOP sprawl. The body reacts in a predictable and devastating pattern: neck and spine solidify first, then shoulders, hips, and elbows. Over years the disease can imprison the entire body: back to front, head to toe, proximal to distal. The rogue gene of FOP has one aim: harden the body a little more every day.¹

As tragic as this disease is, Scripture describes one even worse. The calcification not of the bones but of the will.

God spoke the following words to Moses on Mount Sinai. “I look at this people—oh! what a stubborn, hard-headed people!” (Ex. 32:9, MSG).

The disloyalty of the calf-worshiping Hebrews stunned God. He had given them a mayor’s-seat perch at His exodus extravaganza. They saw water transform into blood, high noon change to a midnight sky, the Red Sea turn into a red carpet, and the Egyptian army become fish bait. God gave manna with the morning dew, quail with the evening sun. He earned their trust. The former slaves had witnessed a millennium of miracles in a matter of days.
Can you match the need of the Israelites on the left with the correct miracle of God on the right? Give it a try. Write a letter beside the number.

___ 1. Slavery
___ 2. Pharaoh’s resistance
___ 3. Homeless
___ 4. Trapped at Red Sea
___ 5. A pursuing army
___ 6. Direction
___ 7. Hunger
___ 8. Thirst

a. The waters return.
b. The promised land
c. Pillar of fire and a cloud
d. Moses to lead them out
e. Manna/quail
f. 10 plagues
g. Water from a rock
h. Wind to part the waters

Mighty miracles … and yet, when God called Moses to a summit meeting, the people panicked like henless chicks: “They rallied around Aaron and said, ‘Do something. Make gods for us who will lead us. That Moses, the man who got us out of Egypt—who knows what’s happened to him?’” (Ex. 32:1, MSG).

The scurvy of fear infected everyone in the camp. They crafted a metal cow and talked to it. God, shocked at the calf-praising service, commanded Moses, “Go! Get down there! … They’ve turned away from the way I commanded them … Oh! what a stubborn, hard-headed people!” (vv. 7-9, MSG).

Can you think of times when any of the following attitudes would have described you? Check all that apply.

- Hard-hearted
- Hard-headed
- Hard-nosed
- Hard to get along with
- Hard to get to know
- Hard of hearing
- Hard-boiled
- Hard to find

FOP spreads in an unhealthy response to injury. Our hearts harden in an unhealthy reaction to fear. Note: the presence of fear in the Hebrews didn’t bother God; their response to it did. Nothing
persuaded the people to trust Him. Plagues didn’t. Liberation from slavery didn’t. God shed light on their path and dropped food in their laps, and still nothing penetrated their hearts.

More than three thousand years removed, we understand God’s frustration. We opt for more sophisticated therapies: belly-stretching food binges or budget-busting shopping sprees. We bow before a whiskey bottle or lose ourselves in an 80-hour work week. We still face fears without facing God.

3 Most of us have our golden calves—a preferred drug of choice, so to speak. How do you tend to respond to stress, fear, loneliness, or pain? Check all that apply.

- Ice cream
- Sexual immorality
- Overwork
- Illicit drugs
- Alcohol
- Pornography
- Partying, clubbing

Others: ____________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4 What evidences of God’s care and involvement do you need to recall in the times when God seems distant as He did to Israel?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
According to heaven’s medical diagnosis, hard-hearted people “are hopelessly confused. Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity (Eph. 4:17-19, NLT).

Measure the irregular pulse of the hard heart:

- “Hopelessly confused”
- “Minds … of darkness”
- “Have no sense of shame”
- “Live for lustful pleasure”
- “Practice every kind of impurity”

Morticians render a brighter diagnosis. No wonder Scripture says, “He who hardens his heart falls into trouble” (Prov. 28:14).

But it gets worse. A hard heart ruins not only your life but also the lives of your family members. As an example, Jesus identified the hard heart as the wrecking ball of a marriage. When asked about divorce, Jesus said, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning” (Matt. 19:8). When one or both people in a marriage stop trusting God to save it, they sign its death certificate. They reject the very One who can help them.

My executive assistant, Karen, saw such stubbornness in a pasture. A cow stuck her nose into a paint can and couldn’t shake it off. Can-nosed cows can’t breathe well, and they can’t drink or eat at all. Both the cow and her calf were in a serious bovine bind.

Karen’s family set out to help. But when the cow saw the rescuers coming, she set out for pasture. They pursued, but the cow escaped. They chased that cow for three days! Each time the posse drew near, the cow ran. Finally, using pickup trucks and ropes, they cornered and decanned the cow.
5 Does the story of the can-nosed cow ever represent a reality in your relationship to God?  □ Yes  □ No
If so, what would you say was the moral of the story?

Seen any can-nosed people lately? Malnourished souls? Dehydrated hearts? People who can’t take a deep breath?

When billions of us imitate the cow, chaos erupts. Nations of bullheaded people ducking God and bumping into one another. We scamper, starve, and struggle. Can-nosed craziness. Isn’t this the world we see? This is the world God sees.

Yet this is the world God loves. “For God so loved the world ...” This hard-hearted, stiff-necked world. We bow before gold-plated cows; still, He loves us. We stick our noses where we shouldn’t; still, He pursues us. We run from the very One who can help, but He doesn’t give up. He loves. He pursues. He persists. And every so often, a heart starts to soften. Let yours be one of them. Here’s how.

6 As you read the following instructions for softening your heart, underline the important actions you can take.

- Don’t forget what God has done for you. Jesus once rebuked His disciples: “Are your hearts too hard to take it in? ... Don’t you remember anything at all?” (Mark 8:17-18, NLT).

- Declare with David: “[I will] daily add praise to praise. I’ll write the book on your righteousness, talk up your salvation the livelong day, never run out of good things to write or say” (Ps. 71:14-15, MSG).

- Catalog God’s goodnesses. Meditate on them. He has fed you, led you, and earned your trust. Remember what God has done.
7 Short memories harden the heart. Make careful note of God’s blessings. Take a few minutes and ask God to show you at least five ways He has blessed you in the past couple of months. Write them in the margin. Then thank God for each blessing. Be specific in your thank-Yous. Tell Him why you’re grateful.

- Acknowledge what you have done against God. “If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts” (1 John 1:10, NLT). We all say harmful things and come up short. We fail and we forget.

- Confess your sins to God. Sin-hoarding stiffens us. Confession softens us.

**YOUR CONVERSATION WITH GOD**

As you spend time with God today, acknowledge the “golden calves” in your life and ask God to help you shatter them. Allow God to reveal reasons you have sought after illusions, false hopes, and 21st-century idols for meaning in life. Ask God to reveal not only your behavior issues but also your motives.

*God and Father, I beg for simplicity. Shield me from ambition and greed. Remind me that You and You alone are my miracle worker. May my passion for You be so alive that it burns away my idols. I pray for the strength to experience absolute surrender. Save me from my self-absorbed thoughts, my selfish aspirations, my need to please, and my self-induced loneliness. Save me from all that is only me and never You.*

**For day 5** turn to “The 3:16 Life” on page 136 and follow the instructions for week 2.
week two

God Loves

day five

MY B.C. STORY

B.C.—Before Christ. The Scriptures say, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Cor. 5:17-18). Everyone has a before-Christ life, and some may still be living in it.

1 Honestly describe what that life was (or is) like before Christ. Think about …
   • Sinful activities, habits, attitudes, or actions that characterized your life
   • Lack of purpose, meaning, direction, joy, or fulfillment
   • Lack of meaningful relationships or broken relationships
   • Suffering from the consequences of your sin
   • Selfishness—a self-directed life rather than a God-directed one
   • Opposition to God and His people
   • Addictions that left you out of control
   • Religious activity without the reality of a relationship with Christ—goodness without godliness
   • Passions and ambitions for things that have no lasting value
   • Counsel from others about your rebellion and wayward life
   • Feelings of darkness, fear, depression, loneliness, despair, hopelessness, shame, or guilt

2 Use the journal space on pages 137–39 to write notes, words, phrases, a poem, or a story to describe your life before you experienced new life in Christ. Conclude with a two- or three-sentence summary of your before-Christ story.
Your Conversation with God

Talk to God about your B.C. life. Talk about how His care was evident even before you were a committed follower. Tell Him ways you need His help to increasingly realize His new creation. Ask yourself this before God: Are you still living on the B.C. side of life, or can you rejoice with Him that you are now His?