

Q&A with Max Lucado

Author of *God Never Gives Up on You*

Q *God Never Gives Up on You* highlights God’s grace and faithfulness. Why did you choose the life of Jacob as the case study?

A If you are looking for a star in a Hallmark movie, Jacob is not your guy.

If, on the other hand, you want to see God’s steadfast devotion
... If you need to know how long God will put up with a scoundrel and his scandals
... If you are wondering if God’s plan has a place for botchers, bunglers, schemers, and last-chancers
... If you could benefit from a tale of God’s unending, unbending, unswerving faithfulness
... If you wonder if God could use a person whose halo has slipped
... Then the story of Jacob is what you need.

When God wanted to identify himself to his people, he declared, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Not just of Abraham and Isaac. He’s also the God of Jacob. God used Jacob in spite of Jacob. Period. The word for such devotion? Grace. Grace came after Jacob. Grace found him in the desert. Grace protected him when he lived in exile. Grace wrestled him to the ground in Jabbok and blessed him. Grace led him home to Canaan.

Q What does Jacob’s life tell us about God’s character?

A Jacob’s story is a testimony to divine, unexpected, unrequested, undeserved kindness. God’s grace isn’t only as good as you are. God’s grace is as good as he is. God’s grace isn’t a lucky charm crucifix on a necklace. God’s grace is a tiger in your heart. His grace never quits. That’s the kind of God he is—he’s the “God of Jacob.” Our God is the God of those who struggle and scrape, sometimes barely making it, hanging on for dear life.

Q What does Jacob’s messed-up family say about our own flawed families?

A A person might read about Jacob’s clan and ask, “Where are the heroes? Who am I supposed to be emulating? Who is the redeeming character in this polygamous mess?” The answer: God! Where you and I see a family that spends more time at each other’s throats than in each other’s arms, God sees an opportunity to display his strength — “Watch what I can do.” God used, and uses, flawed people. He made a promise to Abraham: his children would be like dust on the earth and stars in the galaxies. The greatest person who ever lived would spring from his loins. The story of heaven would be told and distributed through these odd and curious people. God had made them a promise. He never breaks his promises. Case in point: the family of Jacob. Dysfunctional families can be used, even fixed. Function can happen. Good intentions to love can become real. God can flick everything into healing mode. No family is beyond the possibility of a miracle.

Q How did God use a difficult relative to bring about good in Jacob's life?

A God used Laban to teach Jacob to trust God. Jacob didn't like Laban. He wanted to leave Laban. Yet he was better because of Laban. Laban was Jacob's catfish. Research the phrase "catfish and codfish," and you'll find this apocryphal, yet insightful, tale. Fishermen struggled to find a way to deliver codfish to market. They tried freezing them, but the fish lost its flavor. They tried transporting them in a seawater tank. The codfish would be inactive too long, making it soft and mushy. Finally, someone came up with a solution. Catfish and codfish are natural enemies. A catfish was placed in the tank. It chased the codfish during the transport, resulting in the delivery of healthy cod. Great story. While there's no proof that fishermen use catfish, there's ample evidence that God does. In Jacob's story Laban was Jacob's catfish.

And you? Might God be saying the same words to you he said to Jacob? "I see what is happening. I know about the manipulation. The unfairness. The disregard for your feelings or future. I see it. I see you. And I am using this experience to train you." God is prone to do this. Scripture explains, "This trouble you're in isn't punishment; it's training, the normal experience of children. . . God is doing what is best for us, training us to live God's holy best" (Heb. 12:8, 10 MSG). Are you being trained? You, like Jacob, are part of God's delivery system of hope. You are a courier of his covenant. Yet, you, like Jacob, have your share of foibles and flaws. So "God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13 RSV, emphasis mine). He will "equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight" (Heb. 13:21 RSV, emphasis mine).

Q How is the Spirit our advocate?

A Nothing. Jacob had not sought God. Yet what Jacob saw scarcely compares with what Jacob heard. You'd expect a lecture, a holy scolding. But God gave Jacob something altogether different. God told Jacob that he would make him and his descendants a great people who would cover the earth. Despite Jacob's deception and shortcuts, God repeated to him the blessing he gave Abraham and Isaac: "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you" (Gen. 28:15 NIV).

The fugitive had not been abandoned. The trickster had not been cast aside. God committed himself to the lifelong care of Jacob. Again, we might wonder why. Had Jacob done anything to show he was worthy of the blessing? No. Jacob has done nothing but slimy stuff thus far. He leaked integrity like a sieve. He played his brother like a two-dollar fiddle. He worked the system like a riverboat gambler. There is, thus far, not one mention of Jacob in prayer, Jacob in faith, or Jacob in earnest pursuit of God. Even so, God drenched his undeserving fugitive with a Niagara of unexpected kindness. God did not turn away from one who had turned away from him. He was faithful. He still is. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful" (2 Tim. 2:13 NIV).

Grace does this. It pursues. Persists. Shows up and speaks up. In our dreams. In our despair. In our guilt. Grace is God on the move saying, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go . . . I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen. 28:15 NIV).

Q How did Jacob respond to God's blessing?

A Jacob haggled. Rather than receive the blessing and be grateful, the bargain hunter hammered out the key points of a contract. He spoke to God the way he would speak to a camel trader. He suggested a contract. A transaction. An agreement. A working term for this might be transactional theology.

Transactional theology presupposes that we meet God on equal terms. He's got what I want. I have what he wants. So, we reach an agreement. "If you help me in this interview, I'll be kind to my husband." "If you get me out of prison, I'll be a preacher." "If you do this, I'll do that." Really? On what basis do we negotiate with God?

A. W. Tozer wrote, "Left to ourselves we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where we can use Him, or at least know where He is when we need Him. We want a God we can in some measure control." Anytime we suggest that we control spiritual dividends from God, that God is a genie who awaits our rub on the lamp, that God is an ATM who dispenses goodness if we enter the correct PIN, that God is a sky fairy who is under obligation to do what we want because we have thrashed out a deal with him, we border on heresy. We've exchanged a transcendent God to whom we're accountable for a dependent God who's accountable to us.

Q If I've really messed up in life, why would God want to bless me?

A Each day seems to bring a new way for us to wander off course. Anyone who tells you they haven't needs to read a book on honesty. The Christian life is not difficult; it is impossible. Who has a chance? What hope do we have? The same hope that Jacob did. Grace. "Though sin is shown to be wide and deep, thank God his grace is wider and deeper still!" (Rom. 5:20 PHILLIPS). Isn't that the great discovery? "He pre-destined us to be adopted by Himself as sons through Jesus Christ—such being His gracious will and pleasure" (Eph. 1:5 WNT). God moved you into his family. He changed your name, your address, and gave you a seat at the dinner table. You are "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6).

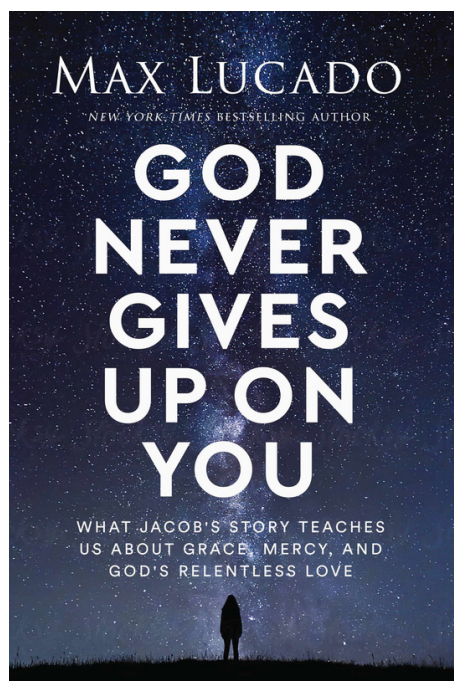
No more self-incrimination. No more self-accusation. No more self-condemnation. Make grace your permanent address. God has joined himself to you. You are "complete" (Col. 2:10). You are "made right with God" (2 Cor. 5:21 NLT). You are "holy, and blameless, and above reproach" (Col. 1:22). "He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Heb. 10:14 ESV). God has made a covenant to love you with an everlasting love, and he will keep it. He did so with Jacob.

Like Jacob, you struggle. Yet like Jacob, you are never disqualified by your struggles. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7). Your treasure? A birthright. A spiritual heritage and destiny. Yet these earthen vessels don't match our treasure.

Q So, God can use our brokenness for good?

A Absolutely. We have minds that wander. Bodies that age. Hearts that doubt. Eyes that lust. Convictions that crumble. We crack under pressure. Our porcelain has fissures. Who wants to use a broken vessel? God does. God does great things through brokenness. Broken soil gives crops. Broken eggs give life. Broken skies give rain. Broken crayons still color. Broken cocoons give flight. Broken alabaster jars give fragrance. The broken bread of the Eucharist gives hope. The broken body of Christ on the cross is the light of the world. Which is precisely the point. God does great things through the greatly broken. It's not the strength of the vessel that matters; it's the strength of the One who can use it.

We don't have to be strong to be saved. We don't have to be perfect to be redeemed. We don't have to score straight A's. We simply need to trust the God of Jacob, believe in a God who sticks with the unworthy and underachievers until we are safely home. He is the God of second chances and new beginnings. The God of grace. His grace never quits.



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God Never Gives Up on You:
What Jacob's Story Teaches Us About Grace, Mercy, and God's Relentless Love
By Max Lucado

Available from Thomas Nelson • September 12, 2023 • Price: US \$28.99 • Pages: 240 • Format: Hardcover • ISBN-13: 978-1400239535

Review copies, reprint permission and interviews are available.
Contact Jana Muntsinger, McClure Muntsinger Public Relations, 832.247.9308, jana@mmpublicrelations.com