

Q&A with Max Lucado

Author of *Help is Here*

Q As a pastor do you have a close-up view of how exhausted people are these days? Is help available?

A Yes. There is a weariness among us. We are weary from the loads we carry and the challenges we face. We have questions we cannot answer and problems we cannot solve. We'd hoped that life would be an invigorating pilgrimage, a high-country adventure. We never expected to grow so tired so soon. We grow weary on the walk. Yet what if there is help? Someone to walk with you and guide you, to shoulder the load. And what if this help was heaven-sent? Not another person who, like you, is prone to blisters and leg cramps. Someone who is ever strong. Never tires. Always near. Unhindered by what hinders us. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. Interested? A better climb awaits.

Q How did Jesus promise the Holy Spirit to his disciples and is this still what Jesus promises us today?

A He would not let his followers begin their ministries unless they knew the Holy Spirit. "Don't begin telling others yet—stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven" (Luke 24:49 TLB). By this point the disciples had spent three years in training. They had sat with him around campfires, walked with him through cities, witnessed him banish disease and command demons. They knew his favorite food, jokes, and hangouts. But they were not ready. They'd seen the empty tomb, touched his resurrected body, and spent forty days listening to the resurrected Christ teach about the kingdom. But they needed more.

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NKJV). Mark it down. The Holy Spirit comes with power. Power to make good choices, keep promises, and silence the inner voices of fear and failure. Power to get out of bed, get on with life, get busy about the right things in the right way. Power to face the unexpected, unwanted passages of time. Power. This is what Jesus promised then, and this is what Jesus promises still.

Q What does the companionship of the Spirit promise?

A No more walking this path alone. No more carrying weight you were not intended to bear. It's time for you to enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit and experience the vigorous life he offers. Your Bible makes more than a hundred references to the Holy Spirit. Jesus says more about the Spirit than he does about the church, marriage, finances, and the future. Why the emphasis on him? God does not want a bunch of stressed-out, worn-out, done-in, and washed-up children representing him in the world. He wants us to be fresher day by day, hour by hour.

Q Why does Jesus use a personal pronoun to describe the Spirit?

A Jesus doesn't want us to think of the Holy Spirit as an it or a thing. The Spirit is a person. And, like a person, the Spirit has intellect, emotions, and will. According to one study only four people in ten believe that the Spirit is a divine person. The rest of those surveyed either don't have an opinion or choose to believe the Spirit is more like a power surge than a divine being who empowers and teaches us. That's regretful. How does one have a friendship with electricity? Can you join me in a pledge? I hereby resolve never to call the Holy Spirit an it. The Spirit is a person. And Jesus calls him the *paraclete*.

Q What did Jesus mean by *paraclete*?

A Translators land on different, yet similar, translations for this Greek word: "Comforter" (KJV), "Counselor" (ESV), "Advocate" (NEB), "Intercessor" (margin of the NASB). The Phillips translation interprets the name as "someone else to stand by you." The renderings may vary, but the central message is the same. We are not alone. Yet to what end? Is the Holy Spirit simply a divine companion who keeps us company? If so, that would be enough. Yet the Spirit has a specific, overarching mission. His task is to teach us about Jesus. We are not left alone with our questions. It is not up to us to solve the riddles of our existence. We have a helper, a divine instructor. He will save us from the cul-de-sac of confusion and the dead end of doubt. He does this by enrolling us in the primary course of his university: Jesus Christ.

Q How is the Spirit our advocate?

A In those moments when you have nothing going for you, be assured, you have God's Spirit as your advocate. We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit does. And does he ever! Your Father is more than willing to release blessings in abundance. You have the Spirit as your advocate and your Father as your provider. You may feel weak, but you've never been stronger. As a result, the greatest prayer warriors might very well appear to be the weakest ones: the convicted criminal in jail, the immigrant at the border, the forgotten child in the orphanage. The prayer shawl of depression is every bit as holy as the one made of linen. My mother, riddled with dementia, would lie in her bed and mumble. Our good God heard her. When the veteran with PTSD longs for the courage to reenter society, is this not a heaven-worthy prayer? Right now, at this moment, as I write these words and you read them, the Spirit of the living God is talking to the rest of the Trinity about you. The eternal, unending, ever-creating Spirit is speaking on your behalf.

Q What is the proper posture to experience what the Spirit is offering?

A A childlike spirit. Hungry to be taught. Willing to be led. Humility is the soil out of which the fruit of the Spirit can grow. Invite him into your world. Let your day begin with these words: “Welcome, Holy Spirit!” Make it your aim to walk in the Spirit by inviting him into the details of each day. “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25 NIV). Let this prayer be quick to come to your mind: “In this moment what are you teaching me?” Or, “How am I to respond to this challenge, Lord?” Or, “Direct me, please. Which way should I go?” Pause and listen. Keep an ear inclined toward the Spirit.

Q What does it mean to be “sealed” by the Spirit?

A You know the verb. You twist a jar lid to seal the pickles. You lick an envelope to seal the letter. You notarize the contract to seal the deal. Sealing declares ownership and secures contents. Sealing is the act that says, “This is mine, and this is protected.” When you accepted Christ, God sealed you with the Spirit. He cocooned you, assuring your safekeeping. Satan might woo you, discourage you, and, for a time, influence you. But he cannot have you. Christ “has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30 NLT). You “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13). Later in the same epistle Paul urges us “not [to] grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30). In both passages the apostle spoke in simple past tense so as to emphasize an accomplished deed. We are not being sealed, nor do we hope to be sealed. We have been once-and-for-all-timesealed by the Spirit for redemption. When it comes to divine imprimatur, you and Jesus enjoy the same status. He said, “God the Father has set His seal on [Me]” (John 6:27 NKJV). The Greek word used to describe both the seal of Jesus and the seal of the saint is identical. Would Jesus fear rejection from his Father? By no means. Should you fear the same? No!

Q What is a practical way to access peace the Spirit offers when facing uncertainty?

A It’s midnight. You’ve been trying to get to sleep since ten o’clock, but you cannot. You have a big meeting tomorrow. You need some rest. You try the different sleep-inducing strategies: slow breaths, counting sheep, listening to a Lucado sermon, but nothing works. Your mind won’t shut off. You begin to envision worst-case scenarios. You will forget your notes. You’ll call your boss by the wrong name. Your thoughts spin around in descending circles, taking you down, down, down until you are in a pit. You pound your pillow, and your heart pounds in your chest. The old version of you might have spent the night staring into the dark. But a new version of you is taking shape. A version that has received the fullness of the Holy Spirit. A version that does not face challenges alone but turns quickly to worship. So here is what happens. You climb out of bed and find a quiet place where you can open your Bible and pray. You read the verses that promise peace from the Holy Spirit. “God met me more than halfway, he freed me from my anxious fears ... When I was desperate, I called out, and God got me out of a tight spot. God’s angel sets up a circle of protection around us while we pray.” (Ps. 34:4–7 The Message) You

select a favorite song, either to listen to or to sing. Maybe both. If one isn't enough, you sing some more. Then you pray. You pray in the Spirit and the Spirit prays in you. You surrender tomorrow to the care of your loving God. And then, to make sure the devil knows he has failed, you tell him to leave you alone. I belong to Jesus Christ, thank you very much. So you must depart from here. Indeed, he must. And he will.

Q How does the Spirit helps us make good decisions?

A You will be encouraged by the promise of Scripture. We can be led by the Holy Spirit: "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Ps. 23:3). God, our Good Shepherd, doesn't just feed us; he leads us. He does more than correct us; he directs us. He keeps us on track. He has commissioned the Holy Spirit to guide us down the winding roads of life. A vivid example of this promise is found in the saga of the Hebrew people. They had spent a lifetime within the confines of the small nation of Egypt. They'd never crossed the border. Then, in a furiously fast turn of events, Pharaoh set them free. Centuries of slavery were behind them; a new future was ahead of them. The Red Sea opened, and the promised land beckoned. It was theirs for the taking. Yet they were rookie sojourners. They'd never left their city limits. On their own they stood no chance of survival. For that reason, "The Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire." (Ex. 13:21 NIV) Can you imagine the blessing of this divine GPS? On any given day God told them where to go. Who led the ex-slaves through the Red Sea and through the wilderness? The Holy Spirit. Who leads the children of God today? The Holy Spirit! We have what the Hebrews had minus the manna. Jesus gave this assurance: "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13 NIV).

Q How do we let ourselves be led by the Spirit?

A Here is a direct answer: Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect (Rom. 12:2 NLT). God has a will for you that is "good and pleasing and perfect." To know it, you must not "copy the behavior and customs of this world." His voice must outrank the voices of society. God wants us to be different. Not odd. Not peculiar. Our aim is not to blend in but to look up. God would later tell the Hebrew people, "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong" (Ex. 23:2 NIV). Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world. You cannot hear the Spirit if you are listening to them. If you want to hear from God, the first question you need to ask is not "What should I do?" but "Whom will I hear? Who has authority? Who calls the shots in my life?" If the answer is "people," you will not discern God's direction. If the answer is television personalities, you will not discern God's will for your life. Add to that list horoscopes, palm readers, and tarot cards. If you are following the stars, you aren't following the Son. "The true children of God are those who let God's Spirit lead them" (Rom. 8:14 NCV). Stop following a culture that doesn't follow God and start listening for the Spirit, who speaks on behalf of God.

Talk to him. Ask him to guide you. Seek his will. And then listen. Wait for a response. As we follow him, we begin to discern his voice. I've noticed that he often speaks to me through my own thoughts. This is not surprising. He owns my mind. My body is his temple. I should not be surprised that his answer to my question would come in a form that I can understand. The phrase "led by the Spirit of God" is such a happy one. The Spirit does not drive us like cowboys drive cattle. He gently leads us as a shepherd would lead a flock of sheep. Scripture refers to God as our Shepherd more than two hundred times! He is more committed to leading us than we are to following him. So relax! If you don't sense his guidance, ask again. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding" (Prov. 3:5 NKJV). He is completely capable to lead you where he wants you to go. He might use a nudge, a prick of the conscience, a reminder of Scripture. The Spirit speaks first through the verse. He may complement the verse with a voice. Then again, the verse may be enough.

Q In what way is the Spirit a refining force in our lives?

A The Holy Spirit is the ultimate purifier. He comes to eradicate the defilement from the vessel. Are we fit to serve as a temple of the Holy Spirit? We need the cleansing, sanctifying work of heaven to prepare us for this assignment. So the Spirit comes not just to purify but to beautify, not just to cleanse but to adorn. This refining fire is not always pleasant. It can come in the form of discipline or disappointment, setback or loss. Yet the fire of the Spirit produces ultimate good. When Jesus baptizes us in the fire of the Spirit, it is so we can bear better and more abundant fruit for him. Welcome this refining fire. Invite him to finish this work in your heart. "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16 NIV). In the next life your heart will have been refined of all dross. Jealousy, gone. Greed, gone. Guilt, gone. Regrets, anxiety, and pride, gone forever. This time on earth is a time of preparation, and God's person of preparation is the Spirit. Let him do his work in you.

Q What is the purpose of the gifts of the Spirit?

A It seems to me that the entire world is in a state of trauma. People do not know why they were born or where they are destined to go. This is the age of much know-how and very little know-why. The invisible enemy of sin and secularism has left us dazed and bewildered. In the midst of the wreckage sits God's intended rescue center, the church. We provide a haven for hurting people, a safe place to come in out of the storm. We each have responsibilities, and when we work together, the displaced find a place. And, behind it all, overseeing the operation is the Holy Spirit. And he does this through the distribution of spiritual gifts. "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good ... All [spiritual gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines" (1 Cor. 12:7, 11 NIV). The Holy Spirit is the ultimate gift giver. He garnishes his children with supernatural abilities that glorify God, bless the needy, and edify the church. Would it not be a tragedy of the highest order to miss out on your unique-to-you assignment? Christ gives gifts to his church. The Spirit is his authorized distributor. While the gifts are diverse, their goal is singular: the common good of the community.

Q How would you encourage someone who has grown tired in their walk with God?

A We grow drowsy in our spirituality. Vibrancy is replaced by lethargy. Enthusiasm fades, and, well, we doze off. I'm not talking about hard-hearted rebels or cynics who reject God. I'm talking about the good-hearted saints who experience a dry heart, a waning love—who feel a disconnect in their relationship with God. I may be talking about you. If so, can I tell you some good news? The mightiest force on the planet is here to help you. “The Spirit gives life” (John 6:63 NIV). Could Jesus have stated the mission of the Spirit more clearly? When the Godhead divvied up the assignments for humanity, the Father chose protection and provision, the Son took salvation—and the Spirit? He chose life distribution. Life! Robust. Resilient. Happy hearted and hope filled. Isn't that what we need? The Spirit gives it. Apart from the Spirit we may have bones, flesh, scalps, and teeth, but we have no life. He, and he alone, is the giver of life.

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all” (John 6:63). This emptiness you feel? This zombiness? It won't be healed by a new house, spouse, job, or jewelry. A different date or weight might feel good, but the deep, lasting change you need? Only the Spirit can give it. And he will! Dry marriage? He can enliven it. Dead-end career? The Spirit can breathe on it. Scattered remnants of yesterday's dreams? The Spirit of God can reassemble and rekindle them. Do you feel as if you've been marched into Babylonian captivity? The Spirit can turn captives into an army. It is not his will that you lead a lifeless life. He will breathe on your dry bones. It simply falls on you to be an Ezekiel. Surprised? “Me? Ezekiel?” My invitation has nothing to do with changing your name, moving to Israel, or growing a belly-length beard. It has everything to do with your willingness to invite the Spirit into the dry and dead patches of your world.

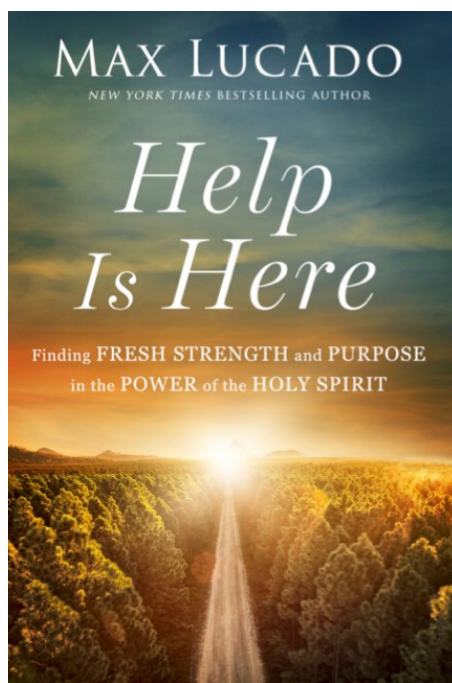
Q Does a person need a second blessing, a post-conversion experience with the Holy Spirit to receive the power from on high?

A Yes! And not only a second but a third and a tenth and a thousandth! I believe I received a fresh anointing of the Spirit this morning before I began the day's writing. Let us eagerly wait for the promised Holy Spirit, moment by moment, day by day. Let us hear again the command of Christ: receive the Holy Spirit. Whether he comes in the form of a gentle breath as he did on the first Easter, or a roaring wind as he did on Pentecost, let us receive him. But let us guard against a complex set of requirements that discourage and hinder the willing heart. The Spirit, like salvation, is received by simple faith.

Q How is this extra blessing not something we need to strive for?

A You need not strive to earn what the Father is so happy to give. The winsome words of Jesus come to mind: “You fathers—if your children ask for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? Or if they ask for an egg, do you give them a scorpion? Of course not!” (Luke 11:11–12 NLT). How absurd! No father would play such cruel tricks on his children. The youngster asks for a snack, and the dad says, “Sure, close your eyes and hold out your hand,” and then places a poisonous spider on the child's palm? If any mother or father would do such a thing, they should not be parents. “So if you sinful people know how to give good


gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13 NLT). If we, with our propensity toward self-centeredness, love our kids enough to keep them from evil and give them what is good, how much more would God do the same? And in his economy the ultimate good is the Holy Spirit. The help you need is here. Ask the Spirit to infuse you with his power. Throw open the door! Swing wide the gate! Stand on the threshold and say, “Come in!” Inhale the one Jesus exhales. Take a deep, refreshing breath of the power and presence of God. Do so now, then again, then again.



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