



This Is Your Life Podcast
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Stu McLaren: Welcome to *This Is Your Life* with Michael Hyatt, where our goal is to help you win at work and succeed at life. My name is Stu McLaren, and I'm your host for season 5 of the podcast. I'm in the studio with my good buddy Michael Hyatt. How are you, buddy?

Michael Hyatt: I'm doing great, Stu. Good to see you.

Stu: Thank you! Good to see you too. It is storming outside.

Michael: I know.

Stu: So you may hear some rumbles. It's not our stomachs.

Michael: We didn't have something that was unsettled in our stomachs at lunch.

Stu: No, no we didn't. But it's kind of fitting because in this particular episode I want to talk about a stormy time in your life, and that's when you were president of Thomas Nelson and you had a bad tumble down the stairs. Can you talk to us about that?

Michael: Yeah. Here's what happened. One morning, I was in a hurry. This was back in the days when we wore suits. I don't know if you remember these, but...

Stu: You wore what?

Michael: Ties, coats, and... Never mind. I don't wear them anymore either. Occasionally I put one on now for a... What do you call it? They come and get you and take you off to the Funny Farm. Anyway, we wore suits in those days. I was walking down the stairs with my briefcase, and I had a cup of coffee in the other hand, so I was not hanging on to the handrail at all. I just caught a stair the wrong way, so I fell down about three stairs, which is not that big a deal, right?

Stu: Yeah.

Michael: I landed, and the coffee went all over my shirt and tie, and I was like, “Oh my gosh!”

Stu: You were frustrated because you knew you had to go and change, and you were probably already tight for time as it was...

Michael: I was already tight for time. Gail was in the other room, and she heard me and came running. She said, “Are you okay?” I said, “Yeah, I think so. I just ruined my shirt.” So then I stood up and put the weight on my right foot, and I suddenly realized something was very wrong.

Stu: “It ain’t good.”

Michael: “It’s not good.” As it turned out, I had broken my ankle.

Stu: Oh my goodness.

Michael: In fact, that little episode cost me about 10 days because I had to go in and have surgery. They put in a plate and six screws. I had to have a boot on my leg for three months.

Stu: Wow.

Michael: It couldn’t have happened at a worse time.

Stu: Because it was very busy.

Michael: It was very busy, and I wasn’t the CEO; I was the president. We still had a CEO, and I reported to him, but I had just taken on this new responsibility. A big piece of my job was investor relations, so I had to travel all over the country and meet with different institutional investors. Here I was in this boot in a wheelchair, and it was a miserable experience. I think the thing that was powerful about it was what came out of it.

Stu: That’s what I want to talk about today. There was a very powerful question that changed not only your viewpoint on this situation, but... You’ve used this question to really change your life.

Michael: I have. I use this question all the time, but here are the questions I could have asked. These are not the question, but these are the questions I could have asked. I could have asked myself, “Why am I so clumsy? Why did I have to stumble down these stairs I’ve gone down hundreds of times? Why was I so clumsy?” I could have said, “Why did I have both hands full?” I had a briefcase and a cup of coffee. That didn’t make any sense either. I could have asked, “Why did this have to happen now?”

Stu: Yeah, of all times.

Michael: “Of all times, why did it have to happen now?” Or I could have asked, “Why did I have to be in such a hurry?”

Stu: I know another question I hear people ask in similar situations. “Why does this always happen to me?”

Michael: Yes.

Stu: Again, it’s a tough question.

Michael: Or another one: “What did I do to deserve this?”

Stu: Right.

Michael: A lot of people ask that question too, but I didn’t ask that question. I asked a better question. I think the questions we ask are so powerful for influencing the way we frame how we understand what happens to us.

Stu: Right, because all of those negative questions really frame it such a way that you can’t do anything about it.

Michael: That’s right. You become the victim, and you’re helpless. Your brain is kind of like a computer in the sense that if you ask a bad question, your brain will spit out the answer. For example, if I ask, “What did I do to deserve this?” Automatically my brain starts thinking of all of the things I did to deserve it, you know?

Stu: Yeah. “Why does this always happen to me? Well, because that’s the kind of person you are.” It’s like a negative track.

Michael: Yep. Exactly right. So the question I asked myself was this: “What does this experience make possible?”

Stu: Wow. Okay, let’s repeat this so people have a chance to absorb it and write it down.

Michael: It’s a hard question. It took me a while to get to it, and I don’t recommend that you ask people who are going through some adversity this question too quickly.

Stu: Right.

Michael: You might get slapped. I've used this question with my family, and they don't usually like it when I ask it right away. But eventually, if we can work around to it, it really does open up the discussion, redeem it, and reframe it in a way that's useful. "What does this make possible?" It's a very subtle shift. It's also kind of my acknowledgement that nothing ever happens by chance.

I just don't believe things randomly happen. I believe I get what I need when I need it, and at some level, I needed that experience. That's not to say that you deserve or need every bad thing that happens to you, but it just means every circumstance you go through can be redeemed. It can be turned to your advantage.

Stu: Right. There's something positive that can be pulled from it.

Michael: Yeah. Let me give you some of the answers I got when I asked this. The truth is that my broken ankle resulted in several benefits. For example, I couldn't go to work for a week, and I got some much-needed rest. I was under doctors' orders to stay down, so by the time I had gotten the surgery done and gone home, I was flat on my back for a week, and it was great. By the way, I started my blog because of that. I started blogging during that time because I suddenly had the time to do it.

Stu: Wow. That's amazing.

Michael: That was back in 2004. Another thing was that I got to board first when I was flying, and I usually got to upgrade to first class for free.

Stu: That's awesome!

Michael: You know, I'd go in with the boot. Several times since then, I've thought, "Man, if I just had that boot, I could board first..."

Stu: You'd get priority boarding. Yeah.

Michael: "I'd get upgraded." Another benefit is that I learned firsthand about the challenges you face when you're in a wheelchair or on crutches. I mean, I'm embarrassed to say this, but I had no frame of reference for that. I had no empathy for that. Suddenly when you're in a position where you're incapacitated physically, you realize that sometimes we make it tough for people who face handicaps or physical challenges.

Another benefit: I was forced to slow down and smell the roses. I couldn't go dashing through the airport. I couldn't go anywhere quickly. I mean, everything just got slowed down a couple

of clicks, and that was a really good thing for a Type-A person like me. Another one: I saw my colleagues take more initiative and gained new appreciation for them.

I couldn't do everything. My CFO who was traveling with me had to take a lot of initiative also, and that was good for me to see. Another benefit was the fact that I got to meet several people I would never have met otherwise, including an amazing surgeon who worked on that leg for me and gave me a new perspective on what it means to integrate your faith with your profession.

Stu: Wow.

Michael: Okay, this is a funny story. This guy is an amazing surgeon. He has a phenomenal reputation here in Nashville, and right before I went into surgery, he asked me, "Michael, are you a praying man?" I said, "Yes I am." He asked, "Do you mind if I pray with you before we go into surgery?" I said, "That would be awesome." So he knelt down by my bed and prayed with me. Such a sense of peace and calm came over me, and I just really appreciated his taking that initiative.

I'll mention one final benefit. I could go on and on, but another benefit was that it was a ready-made conversation starter. People would say, "Hey, what happened to your foot?" So I learned to say funny things, tell the story, and tell this story about what I gained from it. So there were a lot of benefits.

Stu: I love how you said you could go on and on, because that question forced you to think about the benefit of what would normally be a challenging time, a negative situation. This totally reframed it.

Michael: It totally did, and my wife and I have learned to ask this question of one another whenever we go through some kind of adversity. Recently we got caught on a train, and the train broke down. What was supposed to be a 3 1/2-hour journey took seven hours. The first thing out of Gail's mouth was, "What does this make possible?"

Stu: That's awesome.

Michael: Well, the truth is it made a lot possible because we got to sit in this beautiful, scenic place with several people from our family and enjoy a long conversation. That's probably something that wouldn't have happened if that particular train breakdown hadn't happened. So what does it make possible?

Stu: That's great. Well, I love this because (fortunately for us) there are many rewards that can come from that one question: "What does this make possible?" You've identified *four gifts that are hiding in someone's life during some of the most common challenges*. I'd like to talk about those because I think this whole concept of reframing based around this question can be very powerful for people. So let's start with the first gift.

Michael: Let me just set this up a little bit, Stu, in that I really think the most important thing in life is the development of our character. It's not what we acquire. It's not our jobs. It's not our status. It's our character. Unfortunately, our character is usually only developed through adversity, so all of these gifts are related to how we develop our character out of adversity or things that look like they're bad news but turn out to be good news in terms of what they develop and call forth in us.

The first gift is that *waiting gives us patience*. The fact that I couldn't rush right into what I thought needed to be done in that situation where I broke my ankle... I thought I needed to get on the plane, do all of these investor relations, and all of that. I couldn't do that immediately, so I ended up...

Again, the example of blogging... That has become one of the touchstones or foundations of my whole life now. My whole business has grown out of my blog. Little did I know at that point when I fell down those stairs that this life I have now was dependent upon my taking an action during that time.

Stu: It really was the seed and the foundation for everything that has grown from that.

Michael: It was.

Stu: Yeah.

Michael: But it develops patience. I just think that to kind of be content and realize there's a guiding principle in life... I do believe we're guided and things don't just happen by accident. To just rest in that and be patient is important. It was like that train ride. By the way, it's not easy for me to be patient.

Stu: Yeah, because you have a very driven, Type-A personality.

Michael: Oh my gosh. I mean, initially... I have to say this because my family will know I'm not being authentic if they hear this story and I don't tell this part of it. I'm immediately impatient, so when the train broke down, I said, "When we get to our destination, we're getting a bus, and we're going back. I am not going to come back on this same train again."

As it turned out, we couldn't come back on the same train, because there was a mudslide that made it impassable to come back. But then it just settled down to where I just had to be patient, just be in the moment, stop worrying out what I wasn't going to get done, and say, "What's the opportunity right here?" I think that's always the case with patience. What are we missing in the present that we would see if we would just slow down for long enough and be patient?

Stu: So it really is a gift that waiting gives us patience.

Michael: Yeah, and learning to wait is important. I mean, think about your own situation. How long did you wait for Sam, your son?

Stu: Eight years.

Michael: Tell that story. That's an amazing story of waiting and patience.

Stu: Well, my wife and I knew we wanted to adopt, and we wanted to adopt even before we had our own. We didn't know one way or another whether or not we would be able to have our own naturally, but we assumed that we would be able to. We wanted to adopt first, and part of our rationale was that we just wanted the adoptive child to know they were intentionally chosen. We started the process even before we were married, and initially it was supposed to take two or three years.

Michael: That's still a long time.

Stu: That's still a long time. We were adopting from Ethiopia initially, and we started going through the process. Long story short, we were getting very close. We were about three or four months away from being matched up with a child. We were like number 70-something on the list, and they were doing 20-25 adoptions a month, so we were getting close. Then we received a phone call, and it was probably one of the worst phone calls we've ever received. It said the adoption agency that was helping facilitate the adoption was frauding all of the families.

Michael: Wow.

Stu: They were taking the money, and they were using it for weekend trips to New York, home renovations... It was just despicable. So what happened was that the government stepped in and said, "Okay, listen. We're going to try to complete the adoptions of the 400 families who were in the midst of this."

The problem was they went from 20-25 adoptions a month down to maybe one or two a month, so we immediately knew we were going to be waiting a long time. We said, "Okay. We're going to go and do things the old-fashioned way. We're going to try to have our kids the old-fashioned way." So we did, and we had our amazing daughter, Marla.

But the problem from an adoption perspective was that her birth delayed things even further because they wouldn't allow our file to be open until our own child was 18 months old. So that delayed it until then, and then when she was 18 months old we opened our file. Well, now it had been over five years since we had started, so everything was outdated.

We had to do all of the police checks, home checks, social checks, and all of that kind of stuff again, so that delayed it further. Six years had gone by, and finally my wife and I were like, "Okay, this is getting crazy." We wanted to have our kids fairly close in age, and if it wasn't going to happen through adoption, we thought we would try for our own again.

We went to the new agency that had received a lot of the files from the families, and we just went to the president of the organization and said, "Listen. I think we're going to close our file. I think we're done." He said, "Listen. I would strongly encourage you not to do this. Just keep hanging on. You're getting close." So we held on for a little bit longer, and another 1 1/2 years went by. We were at 6 1/2 years.

Then we met with him again. We were saying, "Listen, nothing has progressed. I think we want to move on." He said, "Well, listen. I think you should change your country from Ethiopia to South Africa. South Africa has just opened up their adoption program again. It's a great program. It's run really well, and it's very efficient. I think you would be home with a child within six months."

Michael: Wow.

Stu: That completely changed our dynamic. You know, my wife and I were crying at that meeting, thinking of just the possibility of that happening. So we said, "Okay." We stayed with it again, and six months went by. We didn't hear anything. Eight months went by. Nothing. Now we were rounding out to another 12 months after that meeting.

So we said, "Okay, we can't keep hanging on to this if nothing is really going to happen." So we went back again and said to the president, "Listen. We expected that we would have heard something by now. You said six months, and it has been 12." He said, "Do not give up. I can't tell you any specifics, but I am strongly encouraging that you stick with this."

Michael: Wow.

Stu: I remember that when we came back and were in the car, my wife asked, “Do you think this is just something he’s saying, that he’s just trying to keep stringing us along?”

Michael: Yep.

Stu: At that point, I said, “No. There was something different in his tonality. There was more urgency in his tonality to just be patient and hang on to this.” So we did. We waited another two months, and then I was away. I was in Nashville. We were part of the Inner Circle, and my brother-in-law was with me in the hotel room when my wife called.

I picked up the phone, and she was in tears. It was a great moment. She couldn’t tell me what was happening. She was just like, “We got the call! We got the call! We’ve been matched!” She was in tears, and she said, “But you have to call him back because I didn’t hear anything he said after that point!” So I hung up the phone, and I just sat in that moment.

I just teared up like I am now. I called him back and found out all of the details. His name was Samkelo. It was just amazing. It was an amazing moment, but what was incredible about it was that it was almost like closure. It was a huge redemption. Being patient and waiting all of that time... People ask, “Was it worth it?” Of course it was worth it!

Michael: Absolutely.

Stu: I would do it a million times over, but it’s difficult. It is difficult to be patient and wait in it, but the rewards are so worth it.

Michael: What did that do for you in terms of what it made possible, in terms of developing patience? What has that even made possible for you?

Stu: I think it has taught me a real lesson in that we live in a quick-fix society. I am very much this way. When I want a solution, I just want it now. I don’t want to have to wait. I will pay extra to get something quickly. I was joking with my dad recently. We were at a big live event, and there was a huge lineup for hotdogs and burgers.

A trick I learned from my friend James Wedmore is that instead of waiting in line, I would go to the front and ask two people back, “Hey, what are you looking to order?” They would say, “I’m going to get two burgers.” I would say, “Okay, great. I’ll pay for your burgers if you just place an order for me.” I just want things, and I want to get them done quickly, you know? But there’s value in waiting.

I think one thing is it helps you appreciate what you do get so much more, and the adversity my wife and I faced with the timing and the patience we had to have was so worth it. I think that in the end, that's a really valuable lesson for us. Sometimes quick solutions are great, but there's also tremendous value in being patient and waiting.

Michael: Well, if you think about it, the best and most important things in life are things you have to wait for. They don't happen quickly.

Stu: That also happened with my wife. We dated for seven years. I joke that it took me seven years to convince her I was the man of her dreams, you know? But yeah. I think the best things in life are worth waiting for, and if they are that important to you, patience is definitely necessary.

Michael: That's good.

Stu: Yes. So that's the first gift. Waiting gives us patience. What's the second gift?

Michael: The second gift is that *failure gives us humility*. This is a very underrated virtue. When I was working through my career, I experienced a lot of early success. I left a great big company to start my own company, and I went out and raised some venture capital to make it happen. We grew quickly, and we were kind of The Darlings of our industry. We had a great reputation and all of that. The problem was we grew too quickly. Our growth outstripped our capital, and we essentially went bankrupt.

Stu: Wow.

Michael: That was an incredibly humiliating experience. Little did I know at the time, that was the best possible thing that could have happened to me.

Stu: It doesn't feel like that in the moment.

Michael: It doesn't. I was not feeling confident. I wondered, "Why did this happen to me?" I asked all of those negative questions. I wouldn't want to repeat any of that, but honestly, I learned the most important business lessons of my career going through that (not the least of which was to be humble) because I was humiliated. I think the people we're drawn to in life are the people who are humble.

We're not drawn to the people who are arrogant, the people who think they have it all figured out, but the people who readily acknowledge that they don't have it all figured out, they don't

have all of the answers, and they're still learning and growing. Adversity is a wonderful teacher in that respect.

Stu: Awesome. Well, we are talking about the gifts that the powerful question "What does this make possible?" give us. First, waiting gives us patience. Second, failure gives us humility. We have two more gifts, and we're going to be talking about those after this quick break.

*If you're like most members of my audience, you're committed to winning at work and succeeding in life, but the truth is you struggle with finding enough time to do it all. That's exactly why I wrote my new e-book, *Shave 10 Hours Off Your Workweek: 4 Proven Strategies for Creating More Margin for the Things That Matter Most*. You can't buy *Shave 10 Hours Off Your Workweek*, but you can get it for free by subscribing to my free e-mail newsletter.*

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Stu: Welcome back! We are talking about one of the most powerful questions that can change your life. That is, "What does this make possible?" specifically as it relates to the most common challenges we may face in life. Michael, we've been talking about the gifts that are hidden in the most common challenges. First, waiting gives us patience. Second, you said failure gives us humility. What's a third gift?

Michael: A third one is that *hardship gives us strength*. You know, I've been in so many situations where I didn't think I had the strength to carry on, to make the decisions I was called upon to make, or to face or overcome the adversity or challenge, and yet I found the strength in those moments.

I think that sometimes we don't get the grace until we're right there on the precipice. I worry about it. I think, "Gosh, am I going to be able to handle that when I get there?" Inevitably, we do. I do. I think it develops strength and endurance in us. If we just have a life that's easy, one where we're not called upon to make difficult decisions or we just kind of skate through, we

never develop that sense of resilience and that moral strength, that strength of character that can really carry us forward.

Stu: One of the other things I like to do is remind myself and others of times when they were strong. We often forget. My wife is great at this. When I sold my business, I was filled with all kinds of fear and doubt. One of the things she did was remind me, “You’ll figure this out. You always have, and you always will.”

She gave me specific examples of times in my career when I faced similar challenges or had similar fears or doubts but found a way through it and found a way to succeed. I think we forget about those so quickly, and it’s great to have somebody by your side who can help remind you of when you did face hardship, you powered through it, and you became stronger as a result.

Michael: Yeah. I think that right after I became the CEO of Thomas Nelson in 2006, I had two unbelievable years, and then the Great Recession hit. The bottom dropped out. The economy dropped out. Consumer spending came to a standstill. Our business went down 20 percent in one year.

Stu: Wow.

Michael: In a business of our scale, that was pretty catastrophic. We ended up having to lay off a bunch of people. I remember lying awake many nights and thinking, “I don’t have the strength to do this. I don’t want to lead.” I wished I were somewhere else, but that experience served me so well. As hard as it was, as miserable as that experience was, now I’m so grateful for it because very little flusters me anymore, you know?

Stu: Right.

Michael: I’ve been through the worst of times, and I’m always thinking to myself, “Well, this is difficult or challenging, but this is nothing by comparison.” So it does give us strength. I don’t know if you’ve ever run a long-distance race like a half marathon or a full marathon, but if you complete that, you never face those short races or short runs the same way. You think, “*Psh*. I’ve run a marathon. This is not that big a deal.”

Stu: “Easy peasy.”

Michael: Yeah.

Stu: Yeah. Well, it's not as dramatic an example of a hardship, but I had a similar situation. My wife had this fear of heights, and for the longest time I talked to her about possibly going skydiving. She was like, "No way." It was a write-off. Well, long story short, she did it. I'll never forget when she landed. She was on Cloud Nine.

We were high-fiving each other. We were like, "We can do anything!" For her, being able to do that was like a huge source of strength. If she could overcome that big of a fear, she felt like she could do anything at that point. It's amazing how we do build incredible strength from big challenges in our lives.

Michael: Yep. As I've said before, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Stu: Exactly. Awesome. That's another gift. What's the fourth and final gift that common challenges can provide for us?

Michael: Yeah. *Grief gives us appreciation.*

Stu: Yes.

Michael: Whenever you have a loss (I don't care what it is), you should experience grief. There's that sense of loss, and I think processing grief is a really important thing. It can't be rushed. But eventually it makes you more mindful of the things you have, the things that have remained. You may have had a great loss.

It could have been the loss of a loved one, a job, or any number of things, but in those situations where I've had a loss, I've always come out of it grateful for what I've still had. The people I admire the most are the people who are just grateful. The people who go through life and are easy to be around are the people who are thankful and grateful for everything. Gratitude is a fundamental life skill we need to develop, and oftentimes we don't develop it unless we have to go through adversity.

Stu: Right. Well, this has been great. We've talked about four gifts that are hiding in some of the most common challenges. First, waiting gives us patience. Second, failure gives us humility. Third, hardship gives us strength. Fourth, grief gives us appreciation.

If the question "What does this make possible?" really is the right question to ask in times of trouble, let's quickly go through some toxic questions. We kind of talked about this briefly at the top of the show, but I want to kind of identify it for people just so there's contrast and we can see what a good question does for us but also what a bad question does.

Michael: Yeah. I think another thing is that when we begin to fall into these bad questions (we can all ask these questions when we're under pressure), the people who love us and are also trying to change and become better can call us on it and say, "Wait a second. Let's stop. Let's ask a better question." Here are three toxic questions. First, "Why did this have to happen?" First of all, you probably won't ever know the answer to that.

Stu: Yeah, there's no way to come to a conclusive answer.

Michael: No. You know, you can invent all kinds of things that make you the victim, that make somebody else the villain, but there's no good answer to the question "Why did this have to happen?" The more important thing is what it makes possible. Another toxic question: "What did I do to deserve this?" Probably nothing.

There are times when things that happen are bad and it doesn't have anything to do with you. I just think of random acts of violence where somebody is killed, a robbery takes place, or any number of bad things happen. You didn't deserve it. It didn't have anything to do with you. Again, that's not a good question to ask, because where does it end up?

Stu: It creates confusion.

Michael: That's right.

Stu: There's no conclusive answer that anybody could really come to.

Michael: Yeah. Another toxic question is, "What am I missing out on because of this?" That's a question that sometimes those of us who suffer from FOMO might ask ourselves. No. What are you getting because of it? Again, the question is, "What does this make possible?" It's a powerful, powerful question.

Stu: Well, this has been a great episode, buddy. Thank you so much. If you've enjoyed the episode and you would like the show notes, you can pick those and the video version of today's show up at michaelhyatt.com. In addition, if you could take 30 seconds to rate the podcast on iTunes, that would be tremendously wonderful.

By rating the podcast, you help the show get more visibility, meaning we can get it in front of more great people like you. So just take 30 seconds, jump over to iTunes, and rate the podcast for us. That would be awesome. Michael, as we wind down this episode, do you have any final thoughts?

Michael: Yeah. I would just say to pay attention to the questions you're asking and the internal dialogue that's going on in your mind. The next time you suffer adversity, ask yourself that question. What does it make possible?

Stu: Awesome. Thanks, buddy. Great episode.

Michael: You bet. Thank you.

Stu: Until next time, remember: Your life, your one and only life, is a gift. Now go make it count.