

DON'T LOSE HEART

GOSPEL HOPE *for*
the DISCOURAGED SOUL

JASON MEYER



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*To Cara—
my best friend,
love of my life, and
fellow fighter-for-sight*

CONTENTS



Introduction: *Why Discouragement Is a Liar* 11

PART ONE: HOW TO FIGHT FOR SIGHT 23

1. What to Do When You Feel Overwhelmed 25
2. What to Do When You Feel Defeated 47
3. What to Do When You Feel Worthless 57

PART TWO: HOW TO DEFEAT DESPAIR 75

4. What to Do When the Past Paralyzes You 77
5. What to Do When the Present Disappoints You 103
6. What to Do When the Future Scares You 127

Conclusion: *God's Not Done* 145

Notes 149

About the Author 153

INTRODUCTION

Why Discouragement Is a Liar

THE BIBLE INCLUDES some stories that seem downright strange. Have you ever read something in Scripture and wondered how on earth it applies to our lives today? The Old Testament book of 2 Kings contains a story so archaic it seems unlikely that we could relate to it nowadays.

At the time the story took place, the nation of Syria was warring against Israel. Every time the king of Syria planned an attack, Israel's king would somehow find out about his plans and thwart them. Exasperated, the Syrian king declared there must have been a spy in his ranks and demanded to know who it was. His servant informed him that there was indeed a spy, but he wasn't from Syria. Instead, the

informant was the prophet Elisha, who had been receiving visions of the king's secret plans directly from God and then relaying that information to Israel's king.

As you can imagine, the king of Syria did not take the news well.

One morning, as the prophet Elisha and his servant got up, they encountered a very troubling situation.

When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" (2 Kings 6:15)

Elisha and his servant were going about their regular daily lives when suddenly they were surrounded by one of the greatest armies in the ancient world, the Syrian army. The imbalance of the situation seems almost comical. What were two people against an entire army? When Elisha's servant looked at the Syrian chariots and horses surrounding him, he cried out in despair at their seemingly hopeless scenario.

As we read this story, it's easy to think, "That's interesting enough. But what is the application for me today? I don't have a hostile army forming a siege circle around my home."

You and I may not be staring down an enemy force from a foreign country, but we do face seemingly hopeless

circumstances every day. In 2 Kings 6, the dynamics of discouragement are almost perfectly on display. Like Elisha and his servant, we sometimes find ourselves surrounded by difficulties, and that is when the servant's question becomes our question: "What shall we do?" We share the same problem: We are blind to the big picture.

The Danger of Discouragement

Discouragement is a liar, and the danger is that sometimes these lies are hard to spot because of their sophisticated packaging. The distorted lies of discouragement come to us like a wolf in sheep's clothing. They are clothed in half-truths because they only get part of the picture right. Here is where the story of Elisha's servant and the Syrian army makes its most powerful point. The servant was right about the reasons to lose heart. There was an army of reasons to be discouraged—literally! But the servant saw only half the story.

Elisha told his despondent servant to look at their circumstances again. He needed to be confronted with the full truth so he wouldn't be discouraged by the half-truth. Elisha told him,

"Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are *more* than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed and said,

“O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:16–17)

Discouragement can be defeated only when the full truth of everything that is for us confronts and conquers the half-truth of fear and despair. When the full truth vanquishes those half-truths, our hearts will be comforted and strengthened. In other words, we can “take heart.”

This is the way the Bible speaks of discouragement again and again and again. It does not pretend that the problems are not there; it simply declares that there is more to see. The Christian life is a fight for sight. If all we see is what is against us, the shackles of discouragement will keep us

*Seeing the
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confined to a prison of despair. When we see that the One who is for us is greater than all that is against us, our chains will fall off and our hearts will be free to hope again. Losing heart is easy when the chains of discouragement close tightly around our hearts and choke our hope. But we can take heart when the chains are gone and our hearts set free

once again. Seeing the bigger picture is the key to unlocking the chains of despair.

The Dynamic of Discouragement

We lose heart when we believe half-truths because they remind us that there are *real* reasons to become discouraged. Those troubling facts feel compelling when they stand on their own, and it is easy to become overwhelmed by discouragement because the reasons are real.

I have bad news and good news to share. The bad news is that our fallen world is full of many reasons to lose heart, and they are easy to see. It does not take any special skill to recognize the reasons in our everyday lives. It does not take faith to become discouraged. We just have to take a look at some of the problems that plague us. Discouragement is a heaviness of heart that comes from feeling the weight of those problems piling up on us.

But here is the good news: The reasons to take heart are greater than the reasons to lose heart! In other words, we can defeat discouragement because it is only a half-truth. Encouragement does not come from wishful thinking but from seeing the totality of truth and embracing what is truly real.

Let's go back to the story of Elisha and his servant. When they were surrounded by enemies, Elisha said, "Those who

Here is the good news: The reasons to take heart are greater than the reasons to lose heart!

are with us are more than those who are with them” (2 Kings 6:16). In the same way, encouragement comes when we are convinced that the reasons to take heart are greater than the reasons to lose heart. When we recognize that these reasons are superior, we can take up the biblical battle cry of hope: “We do not lose heart” (2 Cor. 4:1).

Now I have more bad news. Not only are the reasons to lose heart easy to see but the reasons to take heart are harder to see. Vanquishing discouragement is never automatic nor easy. It is a hard-fought *fight for sight*. But why is it hard? Like Elisha’s servant, we are often painfully aware of what is *against* us but woefully unaware of all that is *for* us. Even though the reasons to take heart are greater than the reasons to lose heart, the former can often only be seen “by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

This is where good news comes back into the picture. The reasons to take heart are actually *more* real than the reasons to lose heart. Now I know that it usually feels the opposite because the things that are physically visible can feel more solid or substantial than the promises of God. But the Bible contradicts that half-truth with this full truth: “The things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18). The things we tangibly see are temporary. The things we cannot see—eternal things—are ultimately more solid and substantial and lasting.

The bottom line in the fight for sight is this: We lose heart when we lose sight of all that we have in Jesus. When we lose sight of Jesus, we see only half the picture, we believe half-truths, and we are robbed of hope. But as believers, we are called to fight back.

*We lose heart when
we lose sight of all
that we have in Jesus.*

If we belong to Christ, how can we lose our hope? Christ in us is “the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). The fallen world we live in has many reasons to lose heart, but Jesus says to you and to me, “Take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Dealing with Discouragement

In this book we will look at the issue of discouragement theologically and practically. The problem with many practical theology books is that they are not always practical or theological. This book aims to be both. In the chapters that follow, we will begin by looking at a big picture of God, and then we will look at how that vision affects the practical details of everyday life. The chapters are short and to the point, because a long book on discouragement would be discouraging.

Part 1 of this book is like an eye exam: Do you see the greatness of God? Do you see all that you have in him? If God is for you, then what could stand against you?

And in part 2, we will dig a little deeper by analyzing some of the real-life reasons that we tend to lose heart. We will examine the past, present, and future problems posed by discouragement and discover biblical reasons to take heart. The conclusion is a stirring reminder of a central theological truth: *God is not done!*

Before We Begin

There are two crucial points of context to understand before beginning to read this book. First, please do not think of discouragement only in individual terms. We are not meant to try to defeat discouragement on our own.

I am convinced that we sometimes read verses like Hebrews 12:1 the wrong way.

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

What enters into your mind when you read this verse? Too often we picture running a race all by ourselves. It is easy to understand why; no one can run for us. This truth also applies to the Christian life: Each of us must run our own race.

But this way of reading the text misses the full truth: None of us runs alone. You and I share in a massive community of believers called the communion of saints. We can look around at the godly men and women who have finished the race and are now cheering us on and reminding us that God is faithful. We can also turn to our left and our right to see our brothers and sisters in Christ running along beside us.

There is strength in numbers. Do not try to fight discouragement on your own.

I will never forget an inspiring story I read about the Hanna High cross-country team in Anderson, South Carolina.¹ The people in the stands would come to support their children, but they would cheer the loudest for the runner who always finished last.

*There is strength
in numbers. Do
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your own.*

That student, Ben Comen, had cerebral palsy. Ben's condition caused him to fall constantly because he did not lift his feet high enough when he ran. He tripped on everything and fell hard because his brain could not send signals fast enough to get his arms underneath him to cushion the fall. After every race, Ben ended up bruised and bloodied, but he never quit. He always finished last, but he always finished.

Grown men would break down and weep while watching this display of perseverance. Ben's teammates would go back out on the course to run the last ten minutes of the race with him. The girls' team would also join, and sometimes runners from opposing teams would go back and run with him as well. They would finish the race together.

That is a great picture of Hebrews 12:1 in action: "Let *us* run with endurance the race that is set before *us*." Most of our "races" will not be like a cross-country challenge. The typical life is more like a Tough Mudder with obstacles all around us (razor wire, mud, freezing water, electric lines) and obstacles within (mental and physical fatigue). Life throws similar challenges at us (unexpected medical bills, extended family drama, loss of a job, etc.). But the race of life doesn't last forever, and the stakes are much, much higher. Do not attempt to fight this battle against discouragement alone. Find the most Bible-believing, grace-soaked, Christ-exalting church you can. Put yourself on the path of grace where you will hear the word of Christ, and link arms with others who will run the race with you. The picture of Hebrews 12 fits with the popular African proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together." Let's fight together, run together, and finish together.

Now let me say a word to those of you who are coming to this book with deep wounds. Perhaps you are trying to fight the good fight and run the race with deep-seated

trauma, brokenness, or depression (2 Tim. 4:7). Though you desperately try to combat discouragement by filling your mind with biblical truth, you still find that anxiety, panic, and fear constantly threaten to hijack your brain and body in ways that seem to override anything you believe in your heart to be true. If this describes your daily reality, then you may feel as if I'm asking you to run a marathon with a broken leg or climb a flight of stairs in a wheelchair.

The last thing I want is for you to feel condemned because you cannot run the race as fast as someone else. There is no shame in using crutches if you have a broken leg, and wheelchair ramps are a wonderful gift from God. I believe that God has provided good gifts such as medication and God-honoring, clinically informed, gospel-saturated counseling for those who run the race of faith with conditions that seem to make everything harder. As you read the biblical truths in this book, please do not forget the truth that Jesus is our gentle Savior. He would never break or despise a bruised reed (Matt. 12:20).

This book is not a simplistic replacement for the specialized kinds of professional help that address the complexities of pain and trauma and deep darkness. I am not a medical doctor and do not have expertise in counseling people who are clinically depressed or suffer from considerable trauma. However, even if you are walking through deep darkness, this book can still provide crucial, biblical help.

Introduction

Many Christians will attest that becoming a Christian does not mean that their struggle with depression comes to an end, but it does change some of the dynamics of the struggle. Before coming to Christ, depression can feel like a bottomless pit—a free fall into a dark abyss with no end in sight. After becoming a Christian, depression may still feel like being plunged into darkness, but there is something underneath the darkness—solid ground to stand on.

This book is not designed to treat depression, but my prayer is that it can provide something solid for you to *stand on* when you feel discouraged and struggle in the dark places.² This book is a call to take the sword of truth and the shield of faith and *stand against* the sophisticated half-truths of discouragement.

PART ONE



HOW TO FIGHT FOR SIGHT

PART 1 OF THIS BOOK is like a trip to the optometrist to get our vision tested. Because discouragement is a fight for sight, we are going to look away from counterfeit hopes and fix our gaze on the greatness of the blessed Holy Trinity. Chapter 1 looks at the greatness of God the Father, chapter 2 gazes at the greatness of God the Son, and chapter 3 unveils the greatness of God the Holy Spirit. We are not just asking for a vision from God but a vision of God.

Each chapter will ask us to check something different in our fight for sight. In chapter 1, we will check the scale—not to check our weight but to check our sight. Checking the scale is a call to replace our earthly scale with one that

is God-sized. Chapter 2 is a call to check the score. We will look away from counterfeit scoreboards and turn to see the score that matters for all eternity. Chapter 3 is a call to check our story. We all have a sense of how to tell our own story, but is it accurate? Who gets to tell our story? We will see how the God who writes our story also gets to tell our story.

ONE

What to Do When You Feel Overwhelmed

WHEN I TURNED FOURTEEN, I received a restricted South Dakota driver's permit and I bought my first car—a 1968 Chevrolet Monte Carlo. It had a big engine, which made it easy to speed.

As I drove into my hometown one day, I ignored the speed limit decrease from fifty-five miles per hour to twenty-five. Before I could slow down, a cop clocked me going forty-eight. I had been saving up for a nice car stereo at the time. Instead, all my savings went toward paying that speeding ticket. In addition to draining my funds, I had to borrow money from a family member to cover the rest of the fee. Suddenly I was not only broke but I was also in debt.

One mistake took me from a surplus to a deficit. In the brief time it took the highway patrolman to run my license plate and hand me a slip of paper, I went from encouraged to totally discouraged. I felt like a failure for getting a speeding ticket and losing my meager savings.

The Problem: We Use the Wrong Scale of Measure

On a small scale, this is what often happens to us in life. We look at the various problems that we encounter, and we determine their significance using the wrong scale of measure.

We Count Our Problems

One way we inaccurately measure our problems is by counting them using the wrong equation. The process goes something like this: First, we instinctively try to assess the value of what we want or need. And second, we calculate if we currently have enough to attain those wants and needs. If what we want seems greater than what we have, we often end up getting discouraged.

Here is a simple sketch for the intuitive way we tend to work out this equation in life:

$$\text{WHAT WE HAVE} - \text{WHAT WE NEED} = \text{HOW WE FEEL}$$

If what we have is more than what we need, then we feel that the situation is hopeful. However, if what we have is not enough to cover what we want, then our hope takes a major hit. For example, imagine that you received an unexpected and large car repair bill. If you have \$250 in your checking account but you are suddenly hit with a \$500 bill, your bank balance would be in the negative.

Looking at these circumstances, we might say that your financial security just took a huge hit. It is hard to separate the balance in our bank accounts from the hope in our hearts. Financial hits take a toll on our hope. The greater the hit, the deeper the hole and the darker the despair.

We live in a world that is much more complicated than mere financial analysis. Money is one measurement of the significance of our problems, but it is not the only one. There are many, many more ways to measure the circumstances we face in life. We may measure how meaningful our lives are by calculating if we have enough friends or enough popularity or enough success at work or at school or at parenting or in sports. We may measure our worth based on whether we have the approval of the right person or group.

We Weigh Our Problems

Another way we miscalculate our problems is by weighing them on the wrong scale. We instinctively look at every

area of our lives and don't just count our problems but also weigh each of them.

That same summer I got the speeding ticket, my grandpa died of stomach cancer. I did not simply add those problems up in an equation: 1 speeding ticket + 1 death in the family = 2 total problems. Losing my grandpa felt like a much heavier loss than losing my savings.

It was the first time that I had lost somebody I loved. When my grandpa died, I felt as if my world was crashing down around me. Everything seemed to be going wrong. I even wondered why I should go on living.

We can all relate to the weariness of trying to navigate the ups and downs of life. Just when we think everything is going well and the hope in our hearts begins to rise, something happens unexpectedly that knocks us off balance and causes us to lose that hope. We are continually weighing life's assets and liabilities against one another on the scale of hope and despair.

Something happened to me that summer that changed everything. After my grandpa was diagnosed, he told me that it was worth going through stomach cancer if even one of his grandchildren grew closer to God because of it. After he passed away, I realized I was the answer to his dying prayer.

This awareness felt intensely personal, and through this experience, God became very real to me. In the pit of my

despair and pain, God began to speak to me in his Word and through sermons and songs. I began to sense God's presence and encouragement as I sought him in worship. The hymns I sang became more like the language and longings of my grieving heart, rather than mere words and notes on a page.

This process of facing heartache and loss helped me see what my perennial problem was. The two major problems I was facing—my financial insecurity and my family loss—felt overwhelmingly big because I could only see half of the story. I was looking only at the negative aspects of my current situation and its effects on my life. My issue was that I had taken God out of the equation.

The Solution: Check the Scale

How did I go from losing heart to taking heart? No, the money did not magically reappear in my checking account. I did not get my grandpa back. But I did check the scale I was using to evaluate my problems. When I opened my eyes to the biggest reality in the universe, God came into the equation in a big way.

Looking back now, I can see how this principle plays out in many different scenarios. When we use the wrong scale of measure and take God out of the equation, we can lose heart. Discouragement is only a half-truth; it sees the

truth of a challenging situation, but it lies about God's part in solving the issue. Yes, all the things stacked against us may feel very big, but they do not add up to the full picture.

We lose heart when we buy into the lie that our difficulties are bigger than God.

We lose heart when we buy into the lie that our difficulties are bigger than God, and we lose the fight for sight when we fail to see God correctly. When perception and reality don't align properly, it is easy to become discouraged.

Something similar happens when we look up at the night sky. Most of us have heard the children's song "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." These familiar lyrics are a good example of a situation in which perception and reality are far removed from each other. The stars in the night sky are not little, but they can appear deceptively small because of their massive distance from Earth.

How should we handle this common difficulty between perception and reality? Pastor and author John Piper gives a helpful corrective.

The problem is that in the night sky the wonders of the heavens do not appear as they really are. They seem small and not very bright or awesome. So we must magnify them. That's what a telescope is for. Not to make them look bigger than they are. But to help us, in our weakness,

to stop thinking of them as small and show us how great they really are.¹

He described the example of a comet that passed by the Earth. It was named after a Japanese astronomer named Hyakutake. At its nearest point, Comet Hyakutake was about ten million miles away from Earth. When it passed by our planet, the comet was large enough for people to see it easily, though it appeared smudgy.

Piper went on to explain that even though people could observe the comet with the naked eye, they needed a telescope to get the full picture.

If you can magnify Hyakutake, and show me that a smudgy softball is really 30,000 miles across (four times the size of the earth), I will be more amazed. Or if you can magnify the tail and show me that a dim cloudy trail of light a few handbreadths in width is really 6,000,000 miles long, then I will feel differently about this amazing thing called a comet.²

In the same way, we need to stop thinking of God as small. Our hearts are easy prey when God seems small, because our problems seem bigger than God can handle. But as a telescope reveals the true size of the stars, Scripture gives us an accurate scale to use to resize our problems in light of the greatness of God.

To reset the scales, we must begin by repenting of our false assessment and false measures. Repenting involves replacing and then resizing. We start by replacing our human-centered measurements with God-centered ones. Doing that allows us to resize the situation in light of God's greatness. Instead of saying prayers that turn into a gripe session in which we tell God how big our problems are, we can begin to battle discouragement when we tell our hearts (and our problems) how big our God is.

How to Gain a Proper Perspective

It is important to put our problems into proper perspective. I am not saying that the things that we are facing are small because our problems are often big and overwhelming and beyond our ability to handle. We do not need to minimize how big or painful our problems are, but they can only become small when we view them in comparison to the greatness of God.

Isaiah 40 gives us a helpful example of this point. God's people were discouraged because they seemed so weak in comparison to the powerful nation that held them in cap-

tivity. The problem was that the Israelites were believing a half-truth. Yes, their captors were stronger—the Babylonians were not a small problem!—but the Israelites were using the wrong scale to evaluate the issue. They had removed God from the equation and were comparing themselves to their captors instead of comparing their captors to their Savior.

In response to their distress, God comforted his people by confronting them and calling them to check their scales again. I could spend the rest of this book expounding the images of Isaiah 40, but I will limit myself to two examples in which God says, “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand . . . and weighed the mountains in scales?” (v. 12).

Measure the Waters

The first image focuses on God’s ability to measure “the waters in the hollow of his hand.”

One day I tried to meditate on this image by using myself as an example. I wondered, *How much water can I measure in the hollow of my hand?* I grabbed a measuring cup, filled it, and then tried to pour a full cup of water into the hollow of my cupped hand. It makes me laugh now to think about how much I overestimated the size of my hand. I made a total mess on the counter when I tried to pour that cup

of water into my hand. I learned my lesson and did all my subsequent tests over the sink.

Next, I tried half a cup of water. Not even close. I went down to a tablespoon of water. Still too much. I humbled myself further and grabbed a measuring teaspoon. Finally, the water stayed put (though a few drops slipped out). I can *almost* hold a teaspoon of water in the hollow of my hand. Needless to say, I felt very small.

The contrast between God’s capabilities and my own hit home in a fresh way. How much water can God hold in the hollow of his hand? Isaiah does not reach for a measuring

*God is off-the-charts,
out-of-this-world greater
than we can fathom.*

cup, and he does not provide us with any limits or percentages of how much water God can hold. He just says that God held “the waters”—meaning all of them.

How much water is that? The best estimate we can make is that the Earth has about 332.5 million cubic miles of water. A cubic mile of water equals more than 1.1 trillion gallons.³

That number can make your head spin. While we are busy trying to multiply 1.1 trillion gallons by 332.5 million, God simply says, “Here, let me use myself as the standard of measure. All the waters from all the ponds, lakes, rivers, and oceans on planet Earth fill only a small space in my hand.”

Those who cannot hold a teaspoon of water should trust in the One who cups the oceans in the hollow of his hand like a few drops from a faucet. God is off-the-charts, out-of-this-world greater than we can fathom.

Weigh the Mountains

The second image of the Father's greatness involves picking something up and weighing it on a scale. "Who has . . . weighed the mountains in scales?"

Weighing things on scales is a familiar experience for most of us. Have you ever picked up a bunch of bananas at the grocery store and then put them on a scale to see how much they weighed? Now change that image and make it God-sized. We weigh bananas; God weighs the mountains.

How can we even begin to estimate how much all the mountains on Earth weigh? We struggle to find an accurate measurement for even one mountain. Take Mount Everest as an example. If we start with the height of 11,500 feet from Base Camp to summit, then we can estimate that the volume of Mount Everest is around 2.1 trillion cubic feet. Multiply that by the density, and Everest tips the scale at about 357 trillion pounds.⁴ However, that number is still an approximate weight because it doesn't include the weight of the snow and ice.

How much is 357 trillion pounds? We couldn't find a crane big enough to lift it, and there is no scale in the world strong enough to weigh it. But the weight of the mountains is nothing to God. He could pick them all up in one hand

*God is the standard of
measure for everything
we encounter or
experience in our lives.*

and skip them like stones across the oceans. The oceans, remember, that he holds in the hollow of his other hand.

The psalmist says of God, "His greatness is unsearchable" (Ps. 145:3). When we are confronted with the truth of that statement, we struggle to comprehend such greatness. There is no scale that could measure it. It would be like trying to weigh a blue whale on a bathroom scale. Our scale will break every time.

The greatness of the Father cannot be measured on a scale because he *is* the scale. God is the standard of measure for everything we encounter or experience in our lives.

Apply the Scale

How do these God-sized images help us take heart when we feel discouraged? After I preached on Isaiah 40 one weekend, I heard that the reality of God's greatness described in that passage became a lifeline for a couple that was visiting our church on a very difficult weekend. They

were in town because their child needed a major surgery. The situation was panic-inducing and heart-wrenching, and they felt crushed by the weight of their concerns. In effect, they were using their own scale of how much weight they could bear, and the situation was far too heavy.

Then the truth of God's greatness landed on them in fresh ways through the words of Isaiah 40. They stopped weighing their issues using their human abilities and started relying on the power of God as their standard. From that point on, whenever they would start to worry, one of them would put out their hand and cup it as if measuring water. This symbol served as a stirring reminder of the greatness of the God who holds all the waters of the world in the hollow of his hand. That image instantly resized the situation for them. When the weight of their situation started to bury them in discouragement, faith would rise again with the reminder of God's greatness.

There are two lies in particular that seem to plague God's people and create a scourge of discouragement. We become easy targets for despair when God seems small or when he seems absent.

When God Seems Small

All too often, we do the exact opposite of Isaiah 40. We take small things and blow them out of proportion so

that they become bigger than God. The audacity of our idolatry is that we think our problems are too big for God to handle.

When I was growing up, I watched the popular movies *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* and *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid*.

Discouragement grows when we shrink God down to our size.

In both of those films, hilarity ensues when things are blown out of proportion—either too small or too big. In the movies, making things too large or too small

results in lighthearted comedy, but resizing when it comes to our problems is a tragedy. We take the greatness of God and shrink him down to our size, while at the same time blowing up and magnifying our problems to be greater than God. It should shake us to the core to see how easily and how frequently we repeat that process.

Discouragement grows when we shrink God down to our size.

When God Seems Absent

The fact that God sometimes seems small is not the only problem we face. Sometimes God seems far away or far removed from our lives. We desperately search for God's presence in our lives, but we can't seem to find him. He feels distant or even absent. At those times, the issue is not

only that we doubt God's power but also that we doubt his presence. We wonder if he has forsaken us.

A close friend of mine had to face the heart-wrenching realities of cancer. The chemotherapy, the hair loss, the nausea, the fatigue, the uncertainty of life expectancy, the medical bills, and the constant pain all took a toll on his fight for hope, but he said the single hardest struggle of all was walking through these things with an aching sense of God's absence at times. The feeling that God was not there for him in his struggles, he told me, was far worse than all the other burdens combined.

God gets right to the point in addressing that lie in the book of Isaiah. Many of us have struggled with exactly the same complaint that Isaiah's readers expressed in chapter 49. They heard that God was powerful and wise, but they doubted his presence. They felt abandoned, so they cried out in anguish, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me" (Isa. 49:14).

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In response, God compares himself to a mother. He said to his people, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, *yet I will not forget you*" (Isa. 49:15).

Good mothers are fiercely protective of their children, but because all humans are flawed, there are some sad

exceptions to this general principle. Maternal love is not a guarantee in this life. However, God declares that his love is unconditional and he will never leave us nor forsake us (Deut. 31:6).

Engraved on God's Hands

In Isaiah, God continued to assure the despairing people of Israel of his presence with this beautiful word picture: “Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (49:16).

It was fairly common in the ancient world for a master's name to be tattooed on his servant. In an earlier chapter, Isaiah referred to this practice when he testified that some people have the name of the Lord written on their hand: “This one will say, ‘I am the LORD's,’ another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, ‘The LORD's’” (Isa. 44:5).

But it is with this point that the power of the gospel blows away all our expectations. Never in the ancient world would one see the name of a servant tattooed on their master—ever. That would put the master in the role of the servant, and who could imagine a master devoting his life to serve?

Christians can imagine a master like this, because the High King of heaven became a servant to save his people.

The words of Isaiah 49:16 convey the principle of God's love for his people. In the New Testament, the gospel literally put flesh on that principle. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came as a servant and said that he "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The miracle of God coming to earth as a baby is mind-blowing. The God who heaven and earth cannot contain—the same God who measures the waters in his hand and weighs the mountains in scales—was born as a baby. The perfect, limitless nature and character of God are perfectly revealed and expressed in the person of Jesus. Not only are all the perfections of God present in Jesus but all the perfections are perfectly joined and perfectly balanced together in a union that is fully God and fully man. Jesus is the image of the invisible God—meaning that he is the invisible God made visible. The writer of the book of Hebrews says Jesus is the "radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3).

Paul unpacks this mind-blowing thought for us in Colossians 2:9: "For in him [Jesus] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." This is a one-sentence summary of full orthodoxy on the natures of Christ. He is truly God ("whole fullness of deity"), and he is truly man ("dwells bodily"). Jesus is not part God—he is the very nature of God. He is not part man, merely appearing to be human—he is fully

human, flesh and blood. Jesus got tired, hungry, and thirsty. He cried and he died. The Bible says he “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

Is your mind spinning right now? Heaven and earth cannot contain God—yet the whole fullness of deity dwelled in the human body of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 40:12 asks us to imagine 332.5 million cubic miles of water fitting into the hollow of God’s hand. But Colossians 2:9 asks us to imagine something even more awe-inspiring. Imagine something like 332.5 million cubic miles of water—all the oceans of the world without a single drop missing—fitting into a Styrofoam coffee cup. In Jesus Christ, the infinite fullness of deity dwells in a human body with these two natures joined perfectly and indivisibly with nothing missing.

The incarnation takes us right to the brink of what our language can say and our minds can understand, and then it gloriously goes further. Our minds are left defeated, and we confess to God, “You are in another category altogether!”

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Adore the wisdom. Celebrate the mystery. Thank God for the incarnation of Jesus. He came to

be a servant, and he gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins. The sacrifice of his Son shows God’s incredible love for the world. It is not too good to be true. He really came. He

really suffered. He really died. The Son of God was forsaken on the cross so that we will never be.

You may be facing problems that seem overwhelming right now. If you begin to lose sight of God's presence in the midst of your struggles, remember this: Your Father has not forsaken you. He will never leave you or forsake you. We have this promise not only in writing but in blood.

Not a Tame Theology

Don't buy the lie of discouragement. Your situation is not bigger than God's ability to handle it. Whenever you are tempted to give in to despair, cup your hands together. Be comforted as you are confronted with the greatness of God. Don't forget that God won't forget you. Hope again.

One way to cultivate hope is to memorize and meditate on passages of Scripture that confront our small views of God with glimpses of his greatness. Here are just a few of the many verses that highlight the greatness of God.

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. (Isa. 40:22)

Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you. (1 Kings 8:27)

HOW TO FIGHT FOR SIGHT

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is unsearchable. (Ps. 145:3)

Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and
the earth by your great power and by your outstretched
arm! Nothing is too hard for you. (Jer. 32:17)

These are not tame truths. No matter what your circumstances might be right now, don't lose sight of God. Don't shrink him down to a human-sized scale. Fight off the cold chill of discouragement by fanning these truths into flames. Prayerfully look upon the big truths of God until you can proclaim along with the hymnist that "the things of earth . . . grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace."⁵ We cannot put the Almighty God on a scale or measure his infinite greatness.

Discouragement comes when we domesticate God. Discouragement is defeated when we stop trying to tame God and instead confess with Job:

I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be
thwarted. . . .
Therefore I have uttered what I did not
understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not
know. (Job 42:2-3)

In response, we receive gospel hope for our discouraged hearts through the unwavering promise of God, who assures us:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to
you. (Jer. 31:3)

Have the crushing circumstances of life broken your scale? Broken scales lead to broken hearts. I urge you to replace your scale with the God-sized scale of Scripture. By faith, let us take heart as we press on to know the Lord and reset our scales in terms of the greatness of his power, love, and faithfulness.