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## I NEED A BIG GOD

*My life is messy. Which God do I need to fix my mess?*

I'm that small-town guy who is more comfortable getting my hands dirty working on a garage door than typing on this computer keyboard. I would also rather respond to an emergency pager or fire siren with my fellow firefighters than walk out on a stage to face a crowd of people.

When a family is crying together in pain or outrage at the hospital over the bed of a family member, I have a sense of belonging. It might be uncomfortable and painful, but something inside me says that I belong among the “dirty” situations—the traumas and struggles of life. It's not just the sense of being needed or useful that takes me to those places. It's also a sense of *understanding*. Pain is the humbling equalizer of humanity. Rich or poor, healthy or sick, we all eventually experience it. One way or another, all our hands get dirty.

So, I work with people and get dirty. Not just that, I *am* dirty! I live there amid the emotions, pain, and questions that

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everyone else struggles with, too. Life is hard, and the quick, clean, Disney World–style happily-ever-after solutions people throw around just downright offend me at times. This is especially true about the cheap, pat answers that come from some Christians. It’s as if they live with a blind disconnect between this world and their “faith” world. I’d rather we all be *real* about these things.

My journey has been difficult. It’s been crooked. Sometimes I feel like I’m moving in circles, not knowing how to get above life’s challenges and see the meaning of it all!

And then *God*.

Yep, just *him*. God has a way of stepping into my mess and bringing me what I could never grab ahold of by myself.

I know that some of my life’s story has been put on public display because of the book and movie *Heaven Is for Real*. Talk about awkward! I’m guessing that God is still laughing at me as I squirm even now just thinking about it. I do have to say that I am still amazed at actor Greg Kinnear’s portrayal of me. I don’t know how he observed me so quickly or if God gave him special help or both, but he showed my struggling fairly and downright realistically. The real Todd Burpo has issues—lots of them.

If you are like me, you have wondered out loud about the source of life’s problems. I’ve been crushed personally at times, seeing people deal with hurts far greater than my own. Because of them, I live with a sense of gratitude that my problems aren’t so bad in comparison.

So, what gives? Is it me? Or is it God? Or is it beyond me to even understand it all? But what do I do when God doesn’t do what I thought he should have done?

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When we were children, we all asked questions, *lots* of them. Being a parent reminds you of the awe of life as your little one starts asking for explanations and bounces with excitement at the next big thing life introduces to them. But now we are older, and life's just not as innocent as it once was. We keep problems to ourselves because our questions are now harder to answer, and the answers themselves are harder to grasp.

These days, though, I don't just find children asking me hard questions; I have met people around the world asking me about the broken parts of their lives and wondering out loud if God is big enough to deal with the dirt and hurt they are facing. Or is he too distant even to care about their problems in the first place? They just don't know. I understand their pain. I have asked those same questions myself.

I carry the heartache of burying a loved one. I have the scars of betrayal from people I trusted as friends. I have been lied about, mocked, and schemed against. Where is God in my yesterday, my today, and my tomorrow? Where is he in all of this dirt and mess?

One thing I've learned is to look for his presence in the pain. Instead of just trying to get an answer to make things make sense, I look for his presence in the stuff that doesn't make sense. If I look for him and am sensitive to it, I find him there in meaningful ways. Apparently, God gets his hands dirty just like I do.

Maybe that's why I feel I belong there in the dirt. God isn't afraid to be found there. I find him more ready and willing to respond to the broken and to the hard parts of people's lives than in the neatness and the "put-togetherness" of a nice and pretty church service.

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Could it be that God is so big, our dirt doesn't bother him as much as it bothers us? Could it be that God isn't as put off by my failures and questions as I think he is? And could it be that he even gently laughs at me when I get mad?

I remember what I used to say to my children during their tantrums: "Are you done yet?" I would remind them that I was the parent and they weren't. Yes, I may have gotten angry with them at times. But not one of their fits ever threatened my love for them. It's just what the bigger person in a relationship does.

My friend John's life was changed when he brought this "bigger person" of God into his life. His struggle was alcohol. It consumed him.

After years of brokenness, I saw John in a grocery store one day, and he was excited. He announced that he had found Christ and that everything was different. John remembers what I said to him that day even though I forgot it myself. I believe it was one of those moments when God just took over.

John tells me I said, "Remember, you're *better off* now, but you're not *better than* anyone else."

Because that's where so many of us get put off when people talk to us about God, isn't it? There is that moment we sense them looking down their noses at us as they tell us about God. Then we step back from both that person and God rather than lean forward to think about what God could do in our own lives.

When people have this attitude, it doesn't sound like the Jesus we've heard about or would want to follow. When you try to ask for help with the problems you're going through, many of the people who seemed caring quickly become disinterested or even put off by the dirt and the mess.

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Experiences like that can leave us with a bad taste in our mouths for spiritual things. That bad conversation or uncomfortable moment has the real danger of keeping us stuck in the past, resistant to God and to anyone else who might want to bring him up as a difference-maker in our lives.

God changed me from being chained to my low moments by using my son. Yes, I was and I still am a pastor. But I never have been all that put together. My life's issues had the ongoing tendency to rob my joy and weigh me down both emotionally and physically. You'll hear more about that in the pages to follow. But my son's confidence, innocence, simple childlike faith, and matter-of-factness about Heaven and the God who calls Heaven home astounded me. In fact, it just plain energized me.

The hope my son has for returning to Heaven is just as solid as his faith. He misses Heaven. He misses his sister, too. But he knows that he's going to see them both again one day. Truth be told, I have imagined meeting my daughter so many times now that I feel like I have had a chance to get to know her through my son. I miss her, too.

To this day, I still have a difficult time imagining how a God big enough to hold the world in his hands can exude so much love that a child stands in his presence completely unafraid. But that is exactly my son's description of God. The Bible even backs my son up. The writers in the Bible use more complicated words, but they still describe God the same way. I do believe that perfect love removes all fear, and my son has tried to describe that kind of big God love for years now.

My son is more than unafraid, however. He is drawn to the bigness of God. And why wouldn't he be? Who needs a small

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god? No one does. A small god is no good to anyone. But of course, there's a difference between *needing* and *wanting* what we need.

I *need* a big God, and so do you, but I didn't say I *want* a big God. Sometimes, I act as though I want a small god. I want a god that fits into my world. I want a neat and tidy god that fits on a chain around my neck, or on a bumper sticker on my truck. I want a god that does what I want him to do—one that fits my own personal philosophy.

Maybe I think a small god will be more convenient. I'd like my small god to be like the waiter of a restaurant, who brings my orders to the table fast and hot. If my coffee cup stayed full and if my every desire was not only met but anticipated, I would probably even tip my small god just a little bit more. And if there were an owner of the universal restaurant, I would be sure to note the areas that god could improve on before my next visit.

This “small god who serves me” attitude is a preposterous way to approach the real God, of course. But isn't that a bit of our instinct in the way we relate to God in this world?

Let's take a good long look at what God is *really* like. In our private moments on these pages, maybe you and I can look at one another with honesty and openness about the dirt in each of our lives and the questions we both ask about God. Big problems need big solutions—and our world creates some huge problems. Big questions need big answers—and a small god is not going to answer our questions. That small god will only cause more questions.

Let's talk about the things that scare us and challenge our

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faith in God. Let's talk about the times we have been abandoned to despair and have struggled to hold on to hope. Let's talk about our search for true love and the hurts we need healing for. If we do that, I suspect at the end of this time together, both of us will have a bigger picture of God.

A small god could never help us have this talk. A small god wouldn't have it in him to face—let alone answer—these kinds of questions. But a big God might use this time to speak to both of us. That's just one of the reasons I need a big God, and so do you.