

Heaven's Math

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For us Christians, God is very much a part of our lives. He is, or should be, involved in all that we are and do. We believe He is our Creator: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).¹ We believe He is our companion and protector: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). We believe He owns everything: “Every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills” (Psalm 50:10). With such assurances as these, and many more like them, we would never want to remove God from our lives. Why would we want to expose ourselves to the ebb and flow of life without the God described in these passages?

The problem is that sometimes we *do* leave Him out. Sometimes we may do so inadvertently. But sometimes we leave God out of our lives intentionally, because we want to do our own thing; we want control or we think we have life under control. We want to depend on our own experience or expertise. But when life spins out of control and becomes unpredictable—or it presents seemingly insurmountable problems—what then? Can we rely on our own experience and expertise then?

Let me illustrate. Maybe you've seen or heard of the TV show *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?* Along those lines, I'm going to ask you a few questions. Elementary math is the category for the first couple of questions. Here is the first question: $4 + 7 = \underline{\hspace{1cm}}$. Of course, the answer is *11*.

Here is the second question: If $A = B$ and $B = C$, then $A = \underline{\hspace{1cm}}$. The answer is *C*. In school, we all learned that things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other.

Here is the final math question: True or false? One hundred is greater than ninety. The answer is *True*. One hundred is certainly greater than ninety.

Now let's ask a couple of questions in the category of physics. Here is the first one: For every action, there is an equal and opposite . I remember learning the answer to this one early in my schooling. For every action, there is an equal and opposite *reaction*. It is one of Newton's laws of motion. Here is the last physics question: Resistance to change in motion is called . This question is a little harder; it's another of Newton's laws. The answer is *inertia*. Resistance to change in motion is called *inertia*.

All of these answers are facts. They can be demonstrated clearly and proved mathematically. We really don't have to think too hard about the statement “one hundred is

greater than ninety” in order to see that it’s a clear, verifiable fact. So let’s use that mathematical expression $100 > 90$ to represent your life when it is seemingly in control, when everything is as it should be from your perspective.

What happens, though, when your life is out of control? What happens when you face the impossible? What happens when you run out of resources? We could describe that situation as the opposite of the expression $100 > 90$. We could represent your out-of-control life as trying to force “ninety is greater than one hundred” to be true. Clearly it is not, and nothing you can do will make it so. When your bank account can pay only 90 percent of your bills, you’re in trouble, and there is nothing you can do in your own power to make “ninety is greater than one hundred” a true statement! So let’s use the expression $90 > 100$ to represent your life when it is seemingly “out of control.”

Now, let us go back to the little exercise we did earlier and ask some math and physics questions—but this time we’ll add a twist. This time, we’ll insert God into the equations and expressions.

Let’s start with physics. Here is the first question: When God is in the equation, nothing = _____. Normally, nothing = *nothing*. But if we go to the Bible, we find,

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth. . . .
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm (Psalm 33:6, 9).

And we also find, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Hebrews 11:3).

God did not need any raw materials, Home Depot, or any- thing else. He needed only to speak in order to create. So we can safely conclude that when God is in the picture, nothing = *something*.

Here is the second question: When God is in the equation, impossible = _____. There are many places we can go in Scripture to help us answer this question. Let’s go first to Mark 6:47–49, “When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he [Jesus] was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass them by, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified.”

I don’t know about you, but when I walk out into the waters of a lake, my feet stay

on the ground. And if I walk far enough, I had better start swimming because the water will go over my head. (Actually, as the years have passed, my feet *do* leave the ground, but I don't walk on water—I float!) But the story in Mark 6 says that when Jesus walked into the lake, He stayed on top of the water! Amazing! There was no illusion or trickery here such as we might see at a David Copperfield or Criss Angel magic show. Jesus really walked on water!

Another biblical example, Matthew 9:23–26, tells the story of Jesus raising a young girl from the dead. By all accounts, this poor little girl had died, and her dad was grief stricken. But he had faith in Jesus, and that faith proved to be well founded. Jesus arrived, dismissed the “mourners” (hired for such occasions), and “went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up” (verse 25). She was dead, and Jesus raised her to life!

So from just these two biblical accounts, we can conclude that when God is a part of the equation, impossible = *possible*.

Let's turn to the category of math. Here is the first question. True or false? When God is in the equation, less is greater than more.

The Bible is full of references to help us answer this question. Let's start with 1 Kings 17, which recounts the story of Elijah and a widow. This poor widow and her son had run out of re- sources. Mom was preparing to use the last little bit of flour and oil to make a final meal for herself and her boy—and then they would die. What a pitiful situation! Along came Elijah, and wouldn't you know, he asked her to feed him their last little bit of food! It seems to be a terribly insensitive, callous request.

But the woman recognized Elijah as a man of God, and she trusted God. She fed Elijah, and the blessing she received from God through Elijah was ever-flowing containers of oil and flour! What about Matthew 14? Here we have the story of Jesus preaching to a crowd. It was getting late, and the people were far from any source of food. Jesus asked His disciples for whatever food was available. All they could come up with was a few barley loaves and a couple of fish. Clearly this was not even close to enough to feed the five thousand men present along with their wives and children. I'm sure that Peter could have devoured this little lunch all by himself and still been hungry!

What was Jesus thinking? But He took the lunch, laid it in front of Him, and asked God's blessing on it. Then He began breaking the food into bite-sized pieces. He continued to break the bread and fish into pieces until there was enough to feed everyone—and have several basketfuls left over!

These two amazing stories certainly indicate that the answer to our question is *true*! When God is a part of the equation, less truly is greater than more. The widow trusted that Elijah believed this equation, and she benefited from its being true. The disciples began to learn that with just a little in the hand of their Savior, less is more than enough!

So now we come back to the original question: Why would we want to dismiss God from any part of our lives? When life goes sideways and there seems to be no way out—in other words, when you somehow have to find a way to make *ninety is greater than one hundred* a true

statement—God can make nothing = something. He can make less to be greater than more! He can turn the impossible into the possible.

We live in a time of fearful economic conditions. Our country and our world face nearly incalculable debt. Families are paralyzed financially, and relationships are strained and breaking because of it. Everyone is searching for answers to these problems. Yet as Christians, we have the answer directly in front of us. It can be expressed in the following very simple mathematical expression $90 > 100$.

“But, Pastor,” you say, “I thought you used that expression— $90 > 100$ —to represent my life when it is out of control. You said there is no way to make that a true statement.”

And you’re right. That is what I said. But that was before we put God into the equation. When God is in the equation, *ninety is greater than one hundred* is a true statement!

Let us go to a text that has received a bit of a bad rap—one

that is surrounded by a good deal of cynicism. Frankly, it deals with an area that many of us have left God out of. It deals with the equation of our lives.

“ ‘Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, “How do we rob you?” In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it’ ” (Malachi 3:8–10).

I suspect quite a number of people have been bombarded with this text over the years. We might remember an old preacher, waving his index finger in our faces and reminding us that we have robbed God because we have not faithfully returned our tithes and offerings. Well, whether we like it or not, that old preacher was right. When we withhold tithes and offerings, we do rob God. It is an undeniable truth. The Bible is clear. But this text has sometimes been used as a club to shame or scare people into returning tithe. I don’t believe God wants anyone to use His Word as a club. I don’t believe God wants to shame anyone into doing anything. He wants to lift us out of our guilt and shame! God’s biddings are always accompanied by enablings. This passage is no exception.

Rather than use this text in a negative way, let’s “lift out” the positive, enable the part found in the tenth verse, and concentrate on that. In verse 10, God says “Test me in this . . . and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room enough for it.” In other words, God is saying that “ninety is greater than one hundred!” God is saying that if you have faith enough to give Him a tenth of your earnings, then watch out, because blessings are going to come in such a flood that you won’t have enough room to contain them! This sounds like what happened to the widow who fed Elijah. Her oil and flour continued to replenish well past the containers’ capacity! The disciples learned this principle when they saw a single lunch turn into enough food to feed more than five thousand people—with leftovers! The expression *ninety is greater than one hundred* really is a true statement! Have you tested God? Have you gone to Him in prayer and said, “God, I am

going to take You up on this promise. I am committed to giving You what You have asked for, but I really need You to keep Your promise to pour out abundant blessings, because according to my math, once I give this to You, I'm not going to have enough. I need ninety to be greater than one hundred! So I come to You on the strength of Your promise, respectfully and boldly asking You to keep it. After all, You did say 'Test Me.' ”

Have you ever prayed that prayer? Humanly speaking, that is a really hard prayer to pray—especially if you are short on resources. But let me ask you this: Isn't it a little silly to go to God and say, “God, You just don't understand! You know better than I do that my bank account is limited. My money runs out before my bills are paid—and yet You want me to give *more*? Don't You know I can't squeeze blood from a turnip?”

Isn't it silly to go to the God who *can*, in fact, squeeze blood from a turnip, and walk on water, and raise the dead, and create something from nothing—and say to Him that He can't make ninety be greater than one hundred? Does it not occur to you that He can do more with less? Do you not understand that with God, the impossible is possible and that He lives outside the parameters of your limited understanding regarding how far your resources will go? Do you not grasp that if you have faith, He *promises* that He will blow your mind with what He can do with limited resources?

Our human concerns and worries come from the $100 > 90$ mind-set. Remember, that this mathematical expression represents “my life seemingly in control.” As long as we experience that reality, we *feel* OK. For us, God does not have to be in that equation in order for things to be all right. But when life goes awry, suddenly that equation doesn't work anymore, and without God, we are lost! Our human math can't accommodate the expression $90 > 100$. Our comfort resides in the rational, logical situations under our control. The expression $90 > 100$ is not one of those situations.

But God is not constrained by our reality. He rises above our perceptions of the logical, the rational, the accurate. And He is able to lift us above these perceptions as well. But that means we will have to trust that He is right. It means we will have to have faith in the seemingly illogical and irrational reality that God may bring to the situation. As faulty human beings, that is difficult to do. But when we have faith—even faith the size of a mustard seed—in a God who lives and works outside of our human reality, watch out! He will do amazing things!

There is a possible misconception that I need to address at this point. Until now, the discussion may have sounded as if we don't need God when life is running along in the $100 > 90$ reality. That we need Him only when life slips into the $90 > 100$ reality. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Please note that when life is running nicely in the $100 > 90$ mode, we *feel* like our life is in control; we *feel* OK. But we need to remember that although God is not constrained by the $100 > 90$ reality, He did create it. Although we may feel comfortable in that reality, the truth is that we need God then more than at any other time! Scripture makes a strong reference to this state of being, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have

acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Revelation 3:15–17). When life is seemingly OK, we can easily lose track of our need for God. We can lose track of our real condition.

What we see through human eyes is not what God sees. When life without God is sailing along just fine from our perspective, the reality is that we are wretched, poor, blind, and naked! When God is absent from our lives, we are in a terrible condition—even if life seems good. And when life seems bad, we have no ability to correct things—if God is not there.

That is a sobering thought! God desperately wants us to see life through His eyes. He wants us to be able to depend on Him and trust Him through thick and thin, through good and bad, through times of plenty and times of famine. That means we must give Him our hearts for the long haul. We need to experience His mercy during difficult times and His leading during good times. We need to feel the joy of seeing how God makes *ninety is greater than one hundred* a true statement. When our human eyes see an empty bowl, God sees a container that is far too small to hold the blessings that are coming! When our eyes see a paycheck that won’t make it until the end of the month, God sees an opportunity to keep His promise that He will provide overflowing blessings to His faithful believers.

But God can only make the offer; He cannot accept it for us. We have to reach out and take it in faith. We must trust what He says. We have to take Him at His word. He asks that we test Him. The next step is up to us. We can either trust that He will do what He says—or continue on, confined to the belief that the only reality in life is the reality that $100 > 90$ and that the reverse is impossible.

Can we not take this step of faith? The Creator of the universe says, “Test Me. Please test Me.” Why would we ignore this invitation? Why would we ignore the fact that if we take Him at His word, He will pour out so much blessing there will not be enough room to contain it?

Sure, it will be challenging to take that first step. It’s comfortable and verifiable to live in the reality of $100 > 90$. To live in the reality of $90 > 100$ is dicey and untried. But like an infant taking her first steps, watching her daddy standing with open arms a few steps away and encouraging her to come to him, we can trust God to catch us as we take our first steps of faith.

Endnote

1. All Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New International Version.