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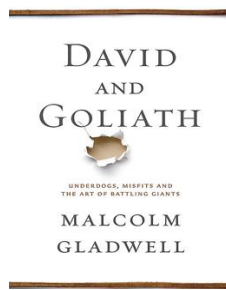
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David and Goliath

By Jake Thorpe



We've all at some point in our life felt largely inadequate. We have all felt that despite our best efforts and intentions, we may not be enough to accomplish the task at hand. I know there are times when I have felt trapped in the throws of mediocrity with little idea how to escape. We have all felt like true underdogs.

This past semester I read a book by Malcolm Gladwell entitled, David and Goliath. This book tells the story of numerous people who were perceived to be underdogs, but instead, found themselves having a competitive advantage.

One such example is particularly poignant for university students. Entitled the "Little Fish Big Pond Theory," Gladwell relates the story of a young woman who finished at the top of her class in high school, where she developed a passion for science and chemistry. When deciding on a university, she yearned for the distinction of going to an Ivy League school and decided to head to Brown University. For the very first time in her academic career, she was challenged. She shockingly found herself in the bottom quartile of her class. In fact, she became so discouraged that she decided she wasn't smart enough to study science at Brown, giving up her lifelong passion. Instead, this distraught young woman decided to study something less demanding, completely changing the trajectory of her life. If she were to have studied at perhaps a less prominent, upper-tier university, she not only would have been able to study what she loved, but also would have been able to thrive and succeed at the top of her class.

People who are successful in a smaller community can place themselves at a disadvantage by entering a "big pond." This young woman's success led her to a place where she lost her competitive advantage.

Once the biggest fish in a small pond, she became a very small fish in the depths of the sea.

Gladwell recounts the story of a dyslexic, failing high schooler who struggled to pass his classes. His grades faltered, but as he attended school, he developed a new skill. While struggling to read, he discovered he had the ability to nearly perfectly recall the words that people said. He could remember every word from school lectures and began to apply himself. This man went on to study law at one of the best universities in the world and is now one of the most prominent attorneys in the United States because of his ability to recall every word prosecutors and defendants say in a trial. His disadvantage compelled him to adapt and ultimately made him more successful.

Like David of old, situations aren't always as they appear. Being at a perceived disadvantage can be one of the most advantageous things in our lives. When we are tried, we refine ourselves, grow, change, and become better. Like an elastic band, when we are stretched, we can reach our full potential.

I know that in my schooling, my perceived failures have opened doors of opportunity that would not have been available otherwise. In times of adversity, look for these doors! The Lord has a plan and will provide a way to achieve your potential. Look for chances to learn and to grow in moments of difficulty. Chances are, you're not the underdog that you see yourself to be.

Gladwell points us to the picture of David and Goliath: "You see the giant and the shepherd in the Valley of Elah and your eye is drawn to the man with the sword and shield and the glittering armor. But so much of what is beautiful and valuable in the world comes from the shepherd, who has more strength and purpose than we ever imagine" (p. 275). Like the simple shepherd boy who slayed the behemoth of a Phillistine soldier, look for the hope of being the underdog and you might overcome, even in the direst of circumstances.

-JT