

“This book took hold of me in chapter one and tightened its grip until, by the end, I was compelled to take up the challenge to ‘Dream Small’. I invite you to join me.”

**ALISTAIR BEGG**, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church,  
Cleveland; Bible Teacher, Truth for Life

“Fresh, invigorating, and liberating. May it be a blessing to all of us ensnared in idolatry of the big.”

**CHRISTOPHER ASH**, Writer-in-Residence, Tyndale  
House, Cambridge; Author, *Zeal without Burnout*

“*Dream Small* is a needed antidote for our age. Seth Lewis re-centers us, reminding us that the great life is the faithful life. Reading this book was like spending an afternoon with a kind friend who brings you back to what’s good, beautiful, and true. I love Lewis’s writing style and stories and, most of all, his exhortation to be faithful in the small things, to love God and to love neighbor, to find freedom in dreaming small. If you have ever wondered, *Am I getting this life right?*, this book is for you.”

**JEN OSHMAN**, Author, *Enough About Me*, *Cultural Counterfeits*, and *Welcome*

“Humble, wise, insightful, and deeply personal, *Dream Small* is an excellent guide to the complex questions of life, giving sound answers grounded in the gospel.”

**J. MICHAEL THIGPEN**, PhD, Provost, Executive  
President, Pheonix Seminary, Arizona

“This little book by Seth Lewis is a powerful reminder of their importance and a needed call to value supremely what ultimately matters to the God who made us and gives us every ounce of strength. In some ways, it is an easy read. But if we listen to what the Spirit is saying through this book, it is tough, for it demands being counter-cultural, even within the church.”

**MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN**, Chair, Professor of Church History, Director of The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Author, *Loving God and Neighbor* with Samuel Pearce

“*Dream Small* is a quiet little volume brimming with overlooked greatness that peels back for us the delights of being an underwhelming collaborator with the true hero, who, in the field of his epic tale, has hidden for you to find, as Seth writes it, ‘the mustard seed kingdom that grows in the ordinary things of ordinary life.’”

**SOTERIA THOMPSON**, Visual Artist, Cross-cultural Worker, Draw From The Heart Art Studio, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

“There is a deep and lasting satisfaction in seeing our dreams come true if, and only if, they are Christ’s dreams for us. *Dream Small* gives us the opportunity to realign our life and hopes towards the goals that God has for us rather than those our ego, upbringing or culture thrust on us.”

**JOHN HINDLEY**, Author, *Serving without Sinking, Refreshed*

“*Dream Small* isn’t an injunction to begrudgingly ‘settle’ but to pursue those things that bring lasting joy and ultimately glorify God. If contentment eludes you, let this small book encourage you to evaluate and refocus.”

**DUSTIN BERGE**, Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Historical Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Author, *The Loveliest Place: The Beauty and Glory of the Church*

“In an age of the cult of the big and spectacular, this book summons the reader to a radical reversal of common values. In a doctrinally imaginative and biblically-rooted way, Seth Lewis argues compellingly for a reassessment of dreams, priorities, and perceptions. This is a great book to give to anyone thinking about the meaning of life and what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.”

**EDWIN EWART**, Principal, Irish Baptist College

“Seth has written a very helpful meditation on the nature of true success, as defined in the Bible. I finished his book more excited about the value of small daily acts of mundane faithfulness and more wary of the tyranny of striving to achieve non-biblical dreams.”

**MATT FULLER**, Senior Minister, Christ Church Mayfair, London; Author, *Be True to Yourself*

*To my grandfather, Robert Peach, who planted the seed for a book in a surprised college student when he wrote my ideas out as chapter headings on a restaurant serviette.*

*And to my wife, Jessica, who watered and weeded what grew from that seed, and made it bloom in ways I hadn't imagined. I love you!*

# DREAM SMALL

The Secret Power of the  
Ordinary Christian Life

**SETH LEWIS**

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## BIGGER AND BETTER

“Don’t forget the children,” she said. “They’re worth a lot in the final count.”

“I won’t, but I don’t think they’ll be enough. You had a better career, so your net worth will be higher. In the end, that’s what matters in The Game Of Life.”

I don’t usually win The Game Of Life. When we have a board-game night at our house I never get the movie star career card with the big salary, and when I cash in my pink and blue pegs at the end they don’t make up for the difference. In the end, it’s all about the money.

Let’s be fair to Hasbro—they had to have some way to determine a winner in their life-simulation board game. They chose money, which means that everything in the game eventually converts to a currency value—even the children. The player who retires with the most cash value wins. It’s a fun game. And there’s a logic to it that

makes sense to us, because a lot of folks play real life by the same rules.

We've got to live for something, after all. We're here on Earth with time and energy and we need to do something with it, hopefully something that will count, somehow. Hopefully something that will satisfy us, and give us confidence that life is worth living, and the things we're doing are worth doing. Like Hasbro's Game Of Life, we need a goal to reach for, a dream to direct our energy and ambition towards. The trouble is that the rules of real life seem a lot more subjective than the game. We're often encouraged to make our own dreams, and make them as big as possible, but then how do we measure the value of a child against the value of a successful career? How do we measure the value of a close friendship against the value of 1,000 followers on social media? What counts for the most, in the end? Can someone please pass the rule book so I can double check the values and know what I'm supposed to be doing here?

Because whatever the rule book is, I'm not sure I'm following it very well. It seems like any way you measure success, I'm behind. Let me introduce myself.

I am nobody. At least, nobody you've ever heard of, which means almost the same thing, these days. But I've probably never heard of you, either, so we have something in common. And it really is quite common, isn't it? The extraordinary people in the world stand out from the rest of us because of the *extra*, not because of the *ordinary*. The

ordinary is just what everybody has. And boy, have I got it. I've got no fabulous wealth or outstanding achievements attached to my name, but I've got so much ordinary you could still call me "extra-ordinary"—not because I have something extra beyond ordinary, just because I've got so much ordinary.

I have scientific proof: I took a workplace assessment once to determine my strengths and weaknesses and find better ways to integrate them with the strengths and weaknesses of my teammates. When the results came back, there was one thing that stood out about my strengths, and that was that nothing stood out. There were a number of areas where I scored well enough, but nothing I was particularly good at, though I know myself there are definitely things I'm particularly bad at. The assessor hastened to reassure me that this can be an advantage. I'm a good all-rounder, passably good at a lot of things, even if I'm not excellent at anything. That's fine, and I see his point, but in that case I'd at least like to be an excellent all-rounder. Like the best all-rounder around, you know, if I can.

Never mind. I can already think of better all-rounders who have more gifts and more highly developed abilities in more areas than I do. The fact is, I'm ordinary. Extraordinary. This feels like a confession, an admission of failure. The only people who consistently try to prove that they are ordinary are some high-powered politicians. But then the chauffeur opens the car door for them and they smile, because they know it's just a game and we all know

how much power and wealth they really have. Outside of politics, the opposite happens: people work long and hard to convince each other that they have power and wealth, or maybe fame, or talent, or anything at all just as long as it isn't ordinary.

### **IS GREATNESS THE GREATEST GOAL?**

We're not supposed to be ordinary. Or at least, not to admit it. Not to want it, or be satisfied with it. We're supposed to dream big, aim high, and never settle for less. Ordinary is just a stepping stone on the path to greatness, something small and slightly shameful to point back to when we finally do make it big and then we can say to everyone, "Just look how far I've come" and their eyes will grow wide with respect for our strength and determination. They'll think we're great, and if everyone thinks we're great, then we really are, right? In our democratic world, isn't that how greatness works? It makes sense. It also makes sense that greatness is the greatest goal we could go for—I mean, what could be greater than greatness?

That's a good question, actually, because greatness doesn't always seem to end up being all that great. I remember visiting a friend who was retiring after a highly successful career. By any measure I could think of, he had done well. He was well known in his field, and his opinions were well respected wherever he went. While not fabulously wealthy, his family was well-off compared to most. As he showed me around his expensive home, he said, "All of my colleagues have bigger houses. I feel cramped here, but I'm

looking at getting something bigger soon". I said nothing, because what could I say? His small house was almost three times the size of mine.

The thing is, he didn't seem three times as happy in his big cramped house. He spent most of our visit complaining about various things and various people. But I remember the old woman who lived in an ancient little shack at the end of our country lane when I was small, and I remember that she was genuinely happy. The light shone through the cracks in her walls, and it shone through the laugh that cracked her face into the kind of deep lines that can only be earned through decades of smiling.

Her house really was cramped, especially when she filled every flat surface with pictures of her many children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. I can't even remember her name now, but I still remember her smile—and the bowl of sweets that was always stocked for visitors. She was not well known, well-off, or even all that well, but she was always welcoming and I wonder: how was this stooped old woman in a shack with no credentials smiling like a winner, while the younger, healthier, richer, far more successful man in the big house was only complaining about his losses? By any measure, her life was smaller. But she found more joy in it than the man who had far surpassed her on the world's ladder of greatness.

How does this happen, and happen so often? I thought the biggest dreams were supposed to bring the biggest happiness and satisfaction and purpose to our lives, so

why do I see so many big dreamers so far ahead of me who are still so dissatisfied, even depressed?

Is it possible that bigger is not always better, that more is not always merrier? It is.

Is it possible that dreams can come in more sizes than just big, bigger, and biggest? It is.

Bigger dreams are not what we need. We need better dreams.

### **BETTER THAN BIGGER**

My friend Nancy has found what the better dream is, but you've never heard of her, because her life is small. Her dreams are small, too. Her focus has always been on the people around her, people you've never heard of—like her children, her church, her community, and extra-ordinary people like me. For most of her life she didn't have a big house or even a shack of her own—she raised her daughters in one rented place or another with her husband, Ernie, and they never had much of a financial margin. When my wife and I moved across an ocean to settle in Ireland she barely knew us, but that didn't stop her from welcoming us and feeding us and talking and listening to us like we were her own family. The cups of tea and chats around her table helped us find our feet in a new place, and made us feel unique and special. She even gave us a key to her front door. Later, we realised that we were not alone—we've met people all over Ireland who have had those keys and who feel like they are part of Nancy's family; people who have

soaked in the warm hospitality of her table and company and her loving, Scripture-saturated encouragement in the various houses that didn't belong to her.

I'd rather visit Nancy's house than any mansion I can think of. Being part of her wide family circle has been better than any inner circle of influence I've been given access to. Nancy's dreams look small on the normal scales of human greatness, but they have tapped into great reservoirs of joy and love and fullness that have overflowed into the lives of so many ordinary people like me.

I'm not saying that every small life is better and happier than every big, successful life. I've seen small, ordinary people eaten up from the inside out with bitterness over the failure of their big dreams, and I know big achievers who have discovered dreams that are better than their achievements. What I'm saying is that at the end of the day, I'd rather have what Nancy has than any amount of money, or fame, or power. I'm not interested in aiming my dreams at empty promises, no matter how big they look. I want to spend my strength and my short time on this planet on things that really matter, no matter how small they look.

### **AIMING OUR AMBITIONS**

In his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, the apostle Paul writes some instructions on how to live. He speaks about self-control and obedience to God, and emphasises growing in love for others. His last piece of "how to" advice for living is this:

*“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you.” (1 Thessalonians 4:11)*

Ambition. A quiet life.

These two things look like antonyms in a world where dreams are only ever allowed to be big. When I think of ambition, I immediately picture the people who accomplish big things, build big platforms, and end up with big voices that they can use to express themselves in big ways. A “quiet life” is what they left behind, not what they aimed for. And yet somehow Paul puts the two together and apparently he’s not telling a joke. He actually thinks that a quiet life of hard work, self-control, obedience to God, and love for others is worthy of aiming our ambitions at (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12). It doesn’t even have to be noticed by anyone else.

To say something like this, Paul must have had a very different way of seeing the world than we are used to. He must have had a very different way of measuring value, of determining what is significant, and what a life is for. His own life was big in many ways (which is why we still talk about him and quote him), but the way he lived it shows us how even a big life can be aimed at the same small dreams he told us to pursue. We’ll look at this more closely in chapter 7, but for now it’s important to note that his advice to others was not to imitate his wide influence or effective strategies or any other metric of worldly success, but rather to focus our lives primarily on smaller things that he says matter most. He even tells us to be ambitious



about them. He just wants to make sure that we aim the drive and power of our ambitions in the direction of things that matter much more, and for much longer, than mere fame, fortune or power.

The world around you will constantly encourage you to follow your dreams. That's not bad advice as far as it goes, but I'm asking you to pause first, and take the time to ask an important question that often gets overlooked: just where, exactly, are your dreams leading you? Before you follow your dreams, you need to aim them. And what will you aim them at? The default assumption which says that bigger dreams will always turn out better is simply not true. Where will you find better dreams?

That's what this book is about. I want to show you that there really are better dreams, and encourage you that you can find them right now, right in front of you, right where you are. In the next chapter, we'll see that the whole world is small, including every big dream and every big dreamer in it. Then in chapters 3 and 4, we'll look at where tiny people like us can find real value and real significance. In chapters 5 and 6 we'll flip the normal ladders of success over and point them at what matters most; then in chapter 7 we'll see how every rung on those ladders can be focused on the kind of dreams God made us for. Finally, in chapters 8 and 9, we'll take a closer look at the hard work involved in dreaming small, as well as the rewards—both now and in the future.

So come with me. Our next stop is outer space.