



## When the Bible’s Metaphors Are Scary



By: Nate Brooks

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The Scriptures brim with all kinds of metaphors, similes, and word pictures to describe God and His work. God has designed us to resonate with imaginative ways of describing reality. We feel God’s unshakable strength as He compares Himself to immovable rock. We feel the deep guttural rumble of God’s power as He calls Himself a lion. We feel His tenderness when He comforts us with rod and staff.

Our connection to these metaphors and pictures is dependent upon our experiences of encountering them outside of the Bible. We connect with God deeply as *lion* because we have stood by an enclosure in a zoo or animal park and felt in our chests the fierceness of a lion’s roar. We grow in appreciation of God’s stability and unchangeableness as we think of El Capitan or the rugged majesty of the Rockies. Images work because they breathe emotion and understanding from one arena of life into another, creating fresh ways to see what has already been seen.

### What If the Images Are Scary?

But what about when a person’s experience of a metaphor or image is profoundly negative? A person who has been mauled by a lion experienced its strength, but that strength was directed toward their harm. That particular metaphor may have become cluttered, a mix of understanding what the Bible is teaching about God and persistent emotional difficulty as talking about God-as-lion brings back into focus things they would much rather forget.

God-as-lion isn’t a dominant metaphor in the Scriptures. But what of a counselee who struggles with the concept of God-as-Father? Earthly fathers are intended to be images of this Great Father, yet some fathers are remembered not for their protection, provision, and kindness but for their self-centeredness, cruelty, and harm. What do we do when a counselee’s experience of their father makes all fathers feel unsafe and untrustworthy?

Answering this question requires careful consideration. On the one hand, we desire for our counselee to have their experience of their Heavenly Father’s goodness overwrite their experience of their earthly father’s cruelty. On the other hand, the damage done to people can run deep, and for many individuals, the visceral turn that happens when staring at the word “Father” drowns out the many other wonderful truths that they could hear otherwise.

God’s multifaceted presentation of Himself through a wide number of images, pictures, and metaphors means that when one of these causes significant distress, we may often get to the same truths about God through other avenues. Rather than simply trying to change their gut reaction to the term “father,” we can begin by asking, “What door *can* we step through into this person’s life that allows them to experience God truly and richly?” More important than connecting with any one image of God is connecting with God Himself.

### God Pictures Himself as Our Mother

One image of God that we may often overlook is all the places God describes Himself in motherly images. Perhaps this is due to concerns that we might begin conceiving of God as a woman. However, there are many places in the Scriptures where God describes His love, His compassion, and His protection in feminine images. Consider the following three examples:

#### 1. God’s Deep Love

“Listen to me, O house of Jacob,  
all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
who have been borne by me from before your birth,  
carried from the womb;  
even to your old age I am he,  
and to gray hairs I will carry you.  
I have made, and I will bear;  
I will carry and will save” (Isa. 46:3-4).

#### 2. God’s Tender Compassion

“As a *mother comforts her son*,  
so I will comfort you” (Isa. 66:13).

#### 3. God’s Fierce Protection

“I will attack them  
*like a bear robbed of her cubs*  
and tear open the rib cage over their hearts.  
*I will devour them there like a lioness*,  
like a wild beast that would rip them open” (Hosea 13:8).

All three of these passages frame God’s strength, compassion, and protection through feminine images. God carries and bears and comforts His children like a mother. He defends them like a bear robbed of her cubs. These character qualities are neither masculine nor feminine, yet they have different hues and textures placed in feminine imagery rather than masculine.

As counselors who seek to engage our counselees with the full counsel of God, we’re wise to be able to use every metaphor and image that God gives us in His text. We don’t want to let fear of people imagining a female deity or worry that we won’t be perceived as “complementarian enough” to functionally clip the Bible into a smaller book. Our desire is to bring the greatest amount of hope to our counselees by using the entirety of what God has given us for our transformation.

### Conclusion

The Bible is deep and wide with metaphors and images about God and His work. Different counselings will connect more strongly with certain images over others as they read the biblical text. The broader our ability to draw from every picture painted by the Scriptures, the broader our help will be as we seek to minister to God’s people.

### Questions for Reflection

1. What are your favorite images or metaphors from the Scriptures? What about these resonate so strongly with you?
2. What images or metaphors do you not resonate well with? Can you identify why this might be the case?
3. What’s one image of God in the Scriptures that you may underutilize in your counseling?

#### About the Author



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Nate Brooks serves as an Associate Professor of Counseling at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC. He is also the director of Courage Christian Counseling, a practice that specializes in trauma, abuse, grief, and loss. Nate is married to Kate, a counselor specializing in chronic pain, and they have three kids who specialize in being kids. When he’s not counseling, Nate can usually be found trail running or reading old Dutch theologians and classic literature.

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