

*You Pick The Sermon: How Does God Use Dreams?*

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*Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Acts 2:1-6,14-21; Genesis 41:1a,8,14-41*

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight is from Genesis 41. Let's listen to the Word of God. "When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream. In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him...so Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires." Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream I was standing on the bank of the Nile, when out of the river there came up seven cows, fat and sleek, and they grazed among the reeds. After them, seven other cows came up -- scrawny and very ugly and lean. I had never seen such ugly cows in all the land of Egypt. The lean, ugly cows ate up the seven fat cows that came up first. But even after they ate them, no one could tell that they had done so; they looked just as ugly as before. Then I woke up. In my dreams I also saw seven heads of grain, full and good, growing on a single stalk. After them, seven other heads sprouted-- withered and thin and scorched by the east wind. The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven good heads. I told this to the magicians, but none could explain it to me." Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine. It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe. The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon. And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine." The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you." So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.""

Muslims are coming to Christ through dreams. For over fifty years, Muslims have reported dreams where Jesus – known to them as Isa the prophet – appears in white and encourages the dreamer to follow Him. The dreams aren't all the same, but the key element is Jesus appearing in dreams to those in countries that have little or no knowledge of Christianity. Just this last week, there was an amazing story about a convert from ISIS – this man was, in his own words, “enjoying killing Christians,” and one of the men he killed forgave him and gave him his Bible before he died. Later that week, Jesus appeared in a dream to him and told this man that he was killing God's people. That man is now a Christian.

We hear stories like that and think, “Wow!” At the same time, it freaks us out. Does God do that? Could He do it to me? Am I supposed to be having dreams and I'm just not paying attention? Or are those weird dreams I have God's way of telling me something! We worry because interpreting dreams gets weird. An Internet search on dreams turns up pages and pages of psychics and unbiblical garbage. But if dreams are in the Bible, what do we do with them?

Our question for You Pick The Sermon was about Joseph's ability to interpret dreams. To understand that, we need to understand dreams in the Bible and in ancient culture. Once we do that, we can see what was going on in Joseph's day and how it applies to us – not just in understanding our dreams, but understanding what Jesus has done for us.

Most ancient cultures were obsessed with dreams. They were desperate to discover any clue about what was coming. Life was hard, and people were fearful that the gods were out to get them. They wanted any insight they could get into the other world, and dreams seemed like a sure bet. In some cultures, you could sleep in the temple so you'd have a religious dream. The more perverse or crazy or obscene the dream, the more likely they thought it had meaning.

And there was a huge industry around dream interpretation. Dream interpreters would tell you what they meant for a fee. Archeologists have found dream interpretation manuals from ancient cultures around Israel. Interpretations centered on word games and puns and rhymes. It's like, “If you dream you're eating an apple, you've become the apple of someone's eye.” Or, “If you dream you've caught a cold, that means you'll soon owe someone gold.”

We think the Bible is full of dreams, but it's really not. In the Old Testament, God shows up in the dreams of the forefathers of Israel – Abraham and Jacob, a few others. The prophets received some prophecies through dreams. But on the whole, there's not a lot of interest in them and little emphasis on interpreting them. In Ecclesiastes 5:3, the author examines the mysteries and miseries of human life, and he says, “A dream comes when there are many cares.” The ancient Jews knew that most dreams represented our anxieties and weren't messages from God.

And dreamers are not always reliable. God warned in Deuteronomy against false prophets – prophets who would tell people a dream he'd had, and it would come true, and he would use their trust to lead them astray. The prophet would tell them that they could follow another god or avoid following God's law. So the Jewish people were reluctant to follow someone merely because he had a dream that came true. Instead, they were always to see if the prophet followed through and preached consistently the truth they knew from Scripture.

But every legitimate dream that God gave to one of His people in Scripture is understood right away – maybe not all its symbolism but its immediate message. Many times, a dream is God speaking. In other dreams, an angel appears. We're familiar with the story of Jesus' birth. When Joseph plans to divorce Mary, an angel appears to him in a dream letting him know the child is the work of the Holy Spirit. Daniel, the other guy who interprets dreams besides Joseph in the Old Testament, who was thrown to the lions for not bowing down to a false god, he had some wacky dreams. Even though they were incredibly strange with bizarre images, he had a guide in his dream that explained it all to him.

So when are dreams interpreted in the Bible? In two situations – Joseph and Daniel – Jewish men are pressed into the service of pagan kings. Both the Egyptians and the Babylonians were fascinated by dreams, enough so that they have dream interpreters as advisors. To make His glory known, God gives the rulers of Egypt and Babylon dreams that none of the pagan wise men can understand. And unlike believers who have dreams in the Bible, the pagans do not have God or an angelic interpreter by their side in their dreams to explain it to them. In those two situations, God uses His people to explain the dreams. Joseph and Daniel act almost identically, so if we study the one, we have a good idea of what the other does too.

First, Joseph gives honor to God. He doesn't interpret the dream out of his own wisdom or enlightenment. The only reason he can interpret dreams is because God explains them to him. There's nothing mysterious about it – Joseph's relationship with God makes interpreting the dreams possible. Then Joseph not only explains the dream, he deciphers what's to be done with the meaning of the dream. If seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of nothing, then make provision for it. Finally, Pharaoh promotes Joseph because of how he has helped his kingdom. God is glorified, God's servant receives authority, and God sets up through the dream events that will bear fruit hundreds of years down the line. It's through the events predicted in the dream that Joseph's people come to Egypt, are eventually oppressed, and are rescued by God in the exodus four hundred years later.

Dreams are meant to point people back to God. If we go home thinking about our dreams but not about the LORD who gives us those dreams, we've failed. So let's take a few moments to think through what we learn about God through dreams in the Bible that affects our relationship with Him today.

*We learn in the stories of dreams that God works in mysterious ways, but His ways are also orderly and consistent.* Dreams intrigue us, fascinate us, and terrify us. Everybody hates bad dreams, and a disturbing dream can throw off your whole day. We wonder as Christians if we're missing something in our dreams, that God is telling us something and we're failing to pick up on it. But following the biblical pattern, that's not an issue for believers.

God's people know what God is doing in every dream they are given by Him. Whether it's Jacob dreaming of a ladder to heaven or the wise men being warned not to return to King Herod after they bring their gifts to the infant Jesus, God's message is clear. In dreams, God gives His people important information, He makes promises, He provides warnings, and He brings reassurance.

Even in those really rare cases where godly men interpret dreams for others, the meaning is immediately clear to them. Joseph doesn't have to go to his room and ponder Pharaoh's dreams; he doesn't even have to pray about it. He's already given God the credit and the glory for the interpretation, and God gives Joseph the answer right on the spot, along with the solution to the problem found in the dreams.

Why does God work in such a mysterious way as dreams sometimes? We'll talk about that in a minute. But we do not need to be afraid of our dreams, and certainly not of God speaking to us through them. In Genesis, God creates order out of chaos. In dreams, God does the same thing – bringing order and a clear divine message to some individuals out of the chaos that most of us associate with our dreams.

Second thought... *God never reveals Himself in dreams to be anything else than the trustworthy, loving, holy God we find in Scripture, and He never expects us to be less than holy either.* Back in the late '70s and early '80s, a number of people wrote books about dreams and visions God had supposedly given them about how the world was going to come to an end when the Soviet Union and the US got into World War 3. While the idea was to get people to come to Jesus, the dreams were obviously false. Many people wrote off Christians as loonies when these folks were proven wrong over and over again.

In comparison, the dreams that God gave to our forefathers in faith came true. Abraham, though he had no children at the age of 90, became the father of a gigantic nation that exists to this day, just as God promised in his dreams. The promise in Jacob's dream that his people would be scattered and that God would bring them back to the land came true, not only in ancient times but in modern ones. God's dreams to the prophets came true, and often they warned of the consequences of forsaking God. Dreams from God are trustworthy.

At the same time, dreams from God call us to holiness. The prophets that experienced dreams throughout the Old Testament warned of God's judgment on those who refused to follow His ways. In dreams, God told the prophets, "Tell the people to return to me." God works in every era of history in unique ways, but His personality and His ways are unchanging. In Scripture, God never gives permission to sin. Dreams from God may reassure us and comfort us, but they will never give us permission to disobey God.

That's a simple way to know if a certain dream is from God or not. If you have a dream where God reinforces what He says in Scripture, if it's consistent with Scripture, if His promises do not contradict what He has said to us in His Word, then we can find comfort in it. But if you've had a dream that makes you think God is approving of something you know is wrong, then it's not God giving it to you. As Deuteronomy told us, God will test us sometimes. He wants us to stand by Him even when other factors make us want to turn away. He will reward us when we choose Him over our own desires and dreams.

*Finally, God's love for us shows the lengths He will go to in order to reach us.* The different ways that God reaches out to us, whether it's through Scripture or through preaching or through friends or through dreams, are amazing, and He deserves our praise for them.

Why is it that God works through dreams at all? Why isn't He more obvious? In Exodus 33:20, God the Father says to Moses, "No man may see me and live." Our sin has so separated us from God that we could not bear to be in His presence. The fullness of His glory would destroy us. It would be like flying a satellite right into the sun. Sin destroys our ability to be in God's presence without a buffer. That's why Jesus came – so that we could be in relationship with God in a real and personal way, just as God was with Adam and Eve in the garden before the fall into sin.

But God has never given up on the people who gave up on him. If He has to reach out to us in dreams to get our attention, He'll do it. No avenue is left untraveled – God has gone down every available road to meet us in our sin and disbelief and bring us back to Himself. In situations like Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dream, God is glorified and, for a time, is known throughout Egypt. God works out His plan to make Himself known to the generations to come through Pharaoh's dream. The Exodus, the key event in Jewish history, takes place because of how things unfold through Joseph's promotion in Egyptian society.

Friends, whether you ever have a dream from God or not, if you ever have some sort of mystical experience of God or your life is rooted in the everyday ordinary, God has gone to great lengths to meet you. Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us this: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."

God no longer has to speak in dreams and visions, though He sometimes does. He has spoken to us in Jesus Christ. We don't have to wait for God to do something amazing; He's already done it. He's already sent His Son to us. By believing in Jesus as Savior and Lord, you can know God. You can experience His love. You can become the temple of the Holy Spirit who will guide you. If you have never believed Jesus, do it today. And if you do believe, then go home today rejoicing. He has spoken to you through His Son – and you may speak with Him in prayer anytime you want, and He will listen and respond. There's no need to wait for a dream to connect with God today.