

Dreams and Visions in the Bible

God's Strategic Communication Tools

By Joseph Winger

Standing there rather awkwardly, I prayed under my breath, "God, help me with this."

It was the second time in a week that I had been asked by someone in my church to interpret a dream. As I nervously shifted back and forth on my feet, I recalled the words of Joseph: "Do not interpretations belong to God?" (Gen. 40:8).

Whew, am I glad it's on His shoulders! While some people expect a pastor to have all the answers, I've never felt comfortable trying to fill God's shoes.

I calmly prayed for an interpretation of the dream—and drew a blank. "I haven't a clue," I told the person. "But let's ask the Lord for clarification. I know He will lead you to a Bible verse or someone who can give you insights."

God did. Later that person told me how the Lord clarified the dream through a certain Bible passage.

God Still Speaks

Our God is a remarkable communicator. He continually gives us feedback, direction, and truth—and one of the ways He does is through dreams and visions. I find that God usually speaks to me through His Word, but on occasion He has guided me by a dream into a clearer example of His will.

For example, 27 years ago I was awakened sobbing from a dream

that to this day grips me with an intense passion to fulfill God's call on my life. The message was simple. The Lord communicated through a dream that He would use me to inspire people to have hearts for Him. Before I share God's Word publicly, I often recall that dream and ask for His grace to make it so.

Jack Deere, in *Surprised by the Voice of God*, defines dreams as "images—accompanied by thoughts and emotions—we 'see' while we are asleep. . . . Visions are dreams we have while we are awake." In some cases, Deere notes, the Bible uses the terms "dream" and "vision" interchangeably, as in Daniel 7:1–2.

In the Old Testament, God frequently communicated to His people in dreams and visions. In the New Testament, He continued to communicate with His servants through visions, but, interestingly, only six dreams are recorded. These are all found in Matthew, and all are about Jesus. Five were at the beginning of His life and one at the end of His life (Matt. 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19–20, 22; 27:19). Four times Joseph received a dream guiding him in caring for the baby Jesus. God warned the wise men by way of a dream not to return to Herod. Then Pilate's wife "suffered a great deal" in a dream about Jesus, and she warned her husband to leave Him alone.

When I look at all the biblical references regarding dreams and visions, I see seven major reasons for this type of special revelation.

- **To expand our understanding of God.** Isaiah and Ezekiel were two prophets whose lives were changed forever by seeing visions of God's majesty and awesome might: "I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne" (Isa. 6:1) and "The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (Ezek. 1:1).
- **To warn us.** If we are not listening to the Lord's warnings in His Word, He sometimes resorts to cautioning

us in the night. If we aren't alert enough to discern our errors, He can use a special revelation to get our attention!

"For God does speak. . . . In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they slumber in their beds . . . to turn them from wrongdoing and keep them from pride, to preserve them from the pit" (Job 33:14–18).

- **To build courage and strength.** Both Jacob and Paul needed assurance of God's presence to take the next step in their faith journey. These revelations from the Lord gave them the confidence to go forward boldly.

"[Jacob] had a dream . . . and [the Lord] said: . . . 'I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. . . . I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you'" (Gen. 28:12–13, 15).

"One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you. . .'" (Acts 18:9–10).

- **To instruct us to go a new direction.** It should bring us great comfort to know that the Lord is faithful to direct us when we need to make a change.

"The angel of God said to [Jacob] in the dream . . . 'Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land'" (Gen. 31:11, 13).

"After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:10).

- **To prepare us for something to come.** Just as Joseph's dream kept him persevering through the hard times, a dream or vision can sustain our hope when we are going through the difficult times of waiting for God to fulfill His promise.

"Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, '. . . We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it'" (Gen. 37:5–8).

- **To give counsel to leaders.** In Genesis and Daniel, we see the Lord frequently using dreams to speak to governmental leaders. Based on these examples, we can pray for God to use dreams to counsel those in authority over us.

"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'" (Gen. 41:25).

- **To give us direction and guidance.** Some biblical dreams and visions were very specific and direct. A particularly striking or vivid dream may be God's way of directing you. Here is how the Lord used a vision to tell Ananias about a vision that He was giving to Paul:

"The Lord called to [Ananias] in a vision . . . 'Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight'" (Acts 9:10–12).

Balance and Discernment

When it comes to dreams and visions, it seems believers fall into one of two camps. One camp “oohs” and “aahs” each time someone shares a spiritual-sounding experience. The second group thinks anything resembling a supernatural encounter with God indicates either psychosis or demonization. The Bible, however, provides us with a balance: an understanding of three potential sources of dreams:

- **God Himself:** “And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night” (Gen. 46:2; see also Num. 12:6).
- **Subconscious inspiration or human intervention:** “as when a hungry person dreams of eating, but awakens hungry still” (Isa. 29:8). Regarding the message of false prophets, God warns, “They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord” (Jer. 23:16).
- **Demonic:** “The idols speak deceitfully, diviners see visions that lie; they tell dreams that are false, they give comfort in vain” (Zech. 10:2).

Because dreams and visions can come from several different sources, we must not accept everything that seems spiritual as if it comes from God (1 John 4:1–3). On the other hand, we must not categorically reject the possibility that God can speak to us in this way.

Our God is a master communicator. Dreams and visions are about Him longing to speak to us. Maybe He will use a dream because that is the only time we are slowed down long enough to hear Him. Through dreams and visions, God can speak to a child like Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10, 15), console an old man like Abraham (Gen. 15:1), or express His heart to believers like you and me.

When Peter quoted the prophet Joel, he did not mention a time

when God would cease to use these methods to communicate to His people: “Your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams” (Acts 2:17). Quite the contrary, Peter implied with words like “in the last days” and “before . . . the day of the Lord” that dreams and visions are communication tools that God can use for believers of all ages and in all ages.

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