

Dead Dreams  
Can Live!

# Dead Dreams Can Live!

*Let God resurrect them*

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To Jonathan  
who cherishes his dream of tomorrow  
yet lives as a man of God today

# Introduction

It's no insult to be called a dreamer. Jesus was one. It was 'for the joy set before him' that he 'endured the cross, scorning its shame'.

The heroes of faith catalogued in Hebrews 11 were dreamers, too. Forever hankering after the ideals rough-sketched in the promises of God, they 'saw them and welcomed them from a distance'.

Dreams are like grappling irons. We throw them up ahead to where we want to be, then heave on the rope to get there.

Let's be clear, though, that by 'dream' I don't mean any old mental fantasy. I mean the dream implanted by God in the heart of every Christian, the dream of being used by him in the outworking of his eternal purpose.

In practice that spells something different for each of us. To one it may be raising a family for God. To another, breaking open new ground with the gospel in some far-flung corner of the earth. To another, publishing Christian books, or making money for the kingdom, or shepherding God's flock, or becoming a prayer-warrior, or composing songs of praise and worship. The variations are endless.

All our dreams, however, have the habit of burning bright for a while, only to die down rapidly to a faint ember. Things don't work out the way we anticipated. Doubts set in, and the dream is written off as a flash of fantasy and then forgotten.

I have written this book to encourage you to hold on to the dream that God gave you. It comes partly out of personal experience and partly from the ups and downs of that classic dreamer and my favourite Bible character: Joseph.

‘Hold on to the dream God gave you’ is my message. But you will also find me urging you to let it die—so that it can realise maximum potential by resurrection. An intriguing paradox, you think? Read on, and all will become clear.

You will find what follows especially relevant if your dream concerns some form of full-time Christian ministry. But the life-principles outlined remain of value and relevance to every child of God—including you—and to every God-given dream.

May your life be touched as you read.

*David Matthew*

Castleford, England, 2006

‘Joseph...was sold for a servant.  
His feet they hurt with fetters,  
he was laid in chains of iron....  
Until his word [to his cruel brothers] came true,  
the word of the Lord tried and tested him.’

*Psalm 105:17-19, Amplified Bible*

You can read the story of Joseph in the Bible.  
It appears in the book of Genesis, beginning at Chapter 37.

## Chapter 1

# Checking out your dream

We all have dreams. They may be the result of eating a cheese sandwich for supper, or they may be straight from heaven.

Even animals have dreams, it appears. I've often watched our family dog, fast asleep in front of the fire, begin twitching and squeaking, apparently chasing a cat down the streets of his doggy dream-world.

Dreams of this ordinary kind are usually a jumbled-up replay of bits and pieces of mental film. It's like a sleeping computer having a hiccup and churning out a hotchpotch of unrelated data onto its screen.

Not that we should regard *all* our dreams as nonsense. Psychologists have delved deep into the subject, assuring us that many dreams reflect our subconscious hopes, fears, aspirations and insecurities, all wrapped up in the picture language of everyday experience.

Not surprisingly, followers of the occult have been quick to exploit this aspect of life. To browse along the shelves of any 'alternative' bookshop is to find a whole range of writings on the interpretation of dreams, with suggested links into the realm of the occult and the alleged influence of the stars.

## Something to live for

What we are chiefly concerned with in this book, however, is dreams in the wider sense.

When Martin Luther King proclaimed, 'I have a dream', he wasn't referring to the pictures in his mind while asleep. He was using the term more in the sense of 'vision' or 'aspiration'. He had a consuming desire to see the black people of the USA fully integrated into society, with equal rights and standing alongside white people. That was his dream, his burning ambition.

For some people, of course, a similar vision or ambition does grow out of a literal dream. Joseph's belief that he was destined for power and leadership came that way (see Genesis 37:5-10). And since then many Christians have embarked upon a life's work for God as the result of a vivid dream (while sleeping) or an equally vivid vision (a waking 'dream').

But for most of us, dreams in the wider sense of the term form more gradually. We find a growing conviction in our hearts regarding our future role in the purpose of God.

Like faith, such a conviction usually just 'comes' (Romans 10:17). We gradually become aware of its presence in our heart and then turn to examine it more closely. It is not a matter of, 'Today I think I'll cook up some dreams and settle upon a goal for my life.' No, we focus more sharply on what's already there.

Andy, a friend of mine, is a typical case. For years he worked very successfully in insurance. During that time his dream of full-time involvement in pastoral ministry became more and more clear until eventually, in his late thirties, he reached full conviction about it. He resigned from his job (with

a warm and appreciative send-off by his colleagues) and enrolled in Bible college with the blessing of his local church leaders.

## Dreams: a necessity

Andy's dream took a long time to crystallise. Yours may come faster, maybe overnight. But one thing is true of us all: *without dreams we can't live*. 'Where there is no vision, the people perish' (Proverbs 29:18 KJV).

Dreams give purpose to life, lifting our sights above the ordinariness of everyday affairs and giving us direction, like the sailor who looks up from the heaving deck of his ship to set his course by the stars.

Without dreams, the humdrum of life and routine, harsh circumstances and annoying people, becomes unbearable. People without dreams are prone to nervous breakdown, bodily sickness and dullness of mind. They have no sense of adventure, no purposeful glint in the eye, no drive.

Tell me, what is *your* dream? What is it that first captured your heart, perhaps years ago, and inspired you to action in order to see it fulfilled?

And what has happened to that dream since then? Has its ability to inspire you remained or faded? Have you become a little cynical with the passage of time and the pressure of hard circumstances? Have you, perhaps, even written off your dream as wishful thinking or crazy youthful idealism and dug in for a long, hard slog of routine for the rest of your life?

In a word, has the dream *died*?

## Is it from God?

Now is a good time to return to the dream and check it out. Start with this basic question: 'Is my dream from God, or not?'

If you can just get the answer to that one, everything else will become clear. Because if your dream *is* from God, there's only one thing you can do: hold on to it! But if it is no more than fantasy or wishful thinking, you can drop it at once and ask the Lord to implant *his* dream in your heart in its place.

One thing you can be sure of: *God does have a dream for you.* It was he, after all, who made you, and he knows that, for humankind, to have no dream is to stagnate.

Open your spiritual ears, then, to hear from the Lord. If the dream you once had is now fulfilled, ask him for a new one. You may have dreamed of being married and now your dream is a reality. Say, 'Lord, where do you want me to go from here? What's the next goal for me?'

You may be facing the particular difficulties labelled by psychologists 'the mid-life crisis'. Somewhere between the ages of 40 and 55 many people, Christians included, go through such a crisis.

'Have I missed my way?' they ask themselves. 'Am I over the hill and redundant to God?' Or, if they came to Christ late in life, they sigh: 'If only I'd been saved earlier, I could have devoted my life to serving the Lord. But now it's too late; my best years are gone for ever, all wasted on selfish, godless activity.'

With God it is *never* too late. You will never be over the hill as far as he is concerned, and certainly you will never be redundant to him—unless, of course, you *believe* you will, in which case it might as well be true, because the results in terms

of despair will be the same.

I don't care if you are 99, or if you have only just come to Christ or if you have frittered away your Christian life right up to today. God still wants to implant a dream in your heart.

Open up to him right now. Ask him to take care of the past, then turn your eyes towards the future and pray, 'Lord, please show me the way forward, give me a sense of direction, implant your dream.'

If that's what you need to do, put this book aside without delay and do it now.

For many of us this won't be necessary because we already have our dream. Our need is to discover whether or not it is from God. How, then, do you check out your dream?

## Giving God credit

For a start, since you are (I hope) a Spirit-filled Christian, submitted to the Lord in body, mind and spirit, why not begin by *assuming that the dream comes from him?* It seems reasonable, after all, to give more credit to God than to your own wishful thinking or to the confusing tactics of the devil.

So tell him, 'Lord, I'm assuming that this dream of mine, this conviction about my future service as a Christian, is from you. If it's not, Lord, please cause it to fade rapidly, but if it is from you, please strengthen it and confirm it within me, so that I'm left in no doubt.'

The Lord will soon make things clear. He can't resist the prayer of the man or woman intent on knowing and doing his will.

## Something desirable

Another pointer is this: the dream will be something you *want*. Though at present it may seem way beyond your reach, you will nevertheless desire it strongly and be unable to shake off the desire .

Again, assume that God is in it. Don't be like the young man who once talked to me about promotion in his job. 'I know it can't be God's will,' he remarked sadly, 'because it's something I want.'

What a strange concept of our heavenly Father! Why should our desire and his will be thought incompatible? It's like the old idea that if a cough medicine tastes nice it can't be much good, or that school-children will never really learn anything if the lessons are enjoyable. How ridiculous!

'Delight yourself in the Lord,' advised King David, 'and he will give you the *desires* of your heart' (Psalm 37:4).

To delight yourself in the Lord is to enjoy his company, to take pleasure in your walk with him. It is to 'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness' (Matthew 6:33). It is to be first and foremost a Christian, with your sights set on pleasing the Lord.

The fact that you may not have been a Christian very long is irrelevant. If God is Number One in your life, that is all that matters. It's not a question of how far you have travelled along the road to Christian maturity but of whether you are moving in the right direction. If you are, then you can be said to be delighting yourself in the Lord and you qualify for the promise.

Do you realise that, no matter how long you have been a believer, you 'participate in the divine nature' anyway (2 Peter 1:4)? Your basic tendency now is to be Godlike, for the 'divine

sperm' is in you (1 John 3:9 literally). God's very own life—his genes, we might say—are at work in you, causing you to grow more and more like your Father.

With this divinely-given head start it is even more certain that as you go on to actively delight yourself in the Lord, your desires will more and more reflect his own desires. What *you* want will increasingly reflect what *he* wants.

Look at your dream that way. Whatever it is, could it be that you want it because he himself wants it and has placed it in your heart? Assume the answer to be yes.

## Obstacles are normal

One line of reasoning you should *not* follow is this: 'I really thought my dream was from God, but even though I pressed hard for its fulfilment it didn't work out. So clearly I was mistaken.'

No! It doesn't follow that if a dream 'dies' it was never from God. In fact I would say the very opposite: in the light of both Scripture and experience, a God-given dream usually *has* to die before there can be a fulfilment. The grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die before it can bring forth fruit.

We sometimes have a simplistic idea that if God is in a scheme it will all click miraculously into place as a token of his approval, but that if problems arise it's a sure sign we have got our guidance wrong.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Sure, God can, and sometimes does, cause everything to fall conveniently into place for us, but, as we shall see, he more often permits difficulties to cross our path.

So if you have dropped your dream just because it didn't

work out the way you expected, pick it up again and hold on to it while we consider God's ways more closely. There's hope for you yet!

Now let's summarise.

- God has a dream for you.
- He is anxious to make it known.
- It will be something you desire.
- And the chances are that obstacles will stand in the way of its fulfilment.

Does that make sense to you? Does it match up to your own experience? It does? Then together let's pursue the matter further.

## *Chapter 2*

# The things that go wrong

My own dream began to form when I was about thirteen, not long after I made my commitment to Christ. It became much clearer when, at the age of seventeen, I was gloriously baptised in the Holy Spirit. I just knew somehow that I was going to be a full-time servant of the Lord. It was my destiny, I believed, to bless many thousands of people in a ministry that would cross international boundaries.

Maybe it sounds a bit ambitious, but that is simply what the dream was, and there is no doubt about it—it was from God.

God implants many dreams in the time of youth so that the seeds can take hold in the fertile soil of youthful zeal. That way, the weeds of cynicism and sophistication, which grow with age, are prevented from smothering the tender plant.

Don't write off your youthful vision. It was at the age of seventeen that Joseph heard from God. He correctly deduced from the dreams of sheaves of corn and of sun, moon and stars bowing down to him that he was destined to play a prominent leadership role in his extended family.

## No trumpeting

Joseph was not very wise, however, in the way he handled his dreams. He talked about them cockily to his older brothers

and strutted around in the richly ornamented robe his father had given him, which was a sign of special approval and heirship, and was seen by Joseph as a token that he was already on his way towards leadership in the family. Little wonder his brothers disliked him!

Don't make the same mistake yourself. Be like Mary, the mother of Jesus, who, when given the most tremendous promise by an angel of the Lord, wisely shared it only with a trusted friend and relative. Even when it all began to happen, she 'treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2:19).

Hold *your* dream in your heart, sharing it wisely and humbly only with those who you know will pray, understand and encourage you rather than be threatened by it or trumpet it all around.

## When things go wrong

Now let's look at the way dreams tend to die. We will leave until a later stage the important question of *why* things go wrong and first focus our attention on *what* goes wrong.

The main culprit here seems to be *circumstances*.

Having a firm grasp of the vision God has given, we imagine that events will slip into place so that it can be fulfilled smoothly and quickly. But we are invariably disappointed.

It wouldn't be so bad if circumstances remained neutral, neither favouring nor hindering the dream's fulfilment. At least then we would be able to push through. But it rarely seems to work out that way. Instead, the circumstances somehow seem to militate *against* the dream's outworking.

'I've already noticed that!' you remark.

So have I, and it's infuriating.

This was certainly my own experience. During my student years, some time after the formation of my dream, I came to believe that God was calling me to missionary work in Peru. So later, happily married and with my studies completed, I fully expected the doors to South America to swing open.

My wife and I approached missionary organisations. We wrote to people in Peru. We visited Peruvian missionaries on furlough. In fact we pushed every Peruvian door we could find, but all our efforts proved in vain.

Then, to cap it all, family circumstances changed. My wife had been brought up by her grandparents, and all along we had felt a special responsibility to repay them for their kindness, especially in their old age. Now they both became quite sick and dependent on us for day-to-day care. How could we possibly leave them stranded?

Who's to blame?

As you know, there are obstacles and obstacles. Some of them, thrown across our path by the enemy, are to be overcome by faith and holy determination. Others are *God's* obstacles, thrust before us by a higher wisdom for our ultimate good, and we attack such obstacles at our peril.

Somehow, my wife and I just knew that our obstacles were from God. He was the one engineering circumstances to block our headlong rush to the rescue of the Peruvian Indians.

How strange! And how impossible to understand. Why should the Lord inspire us with a dream only to block the path to its fulfilment? His love we never doubted, but he seemed to have a peculiar way of showing it.

Perhaps you are feeling like that right now. Take heart—it's normal.

'But some of my circumstances are really awful,' you retort. 'How can you suggest that they come from the hand of a loving God when they bear all the hallmarks of evil?'

Don't forget that Satan is strictly limited. Prowling around looking for someone to devour he may be, but it won't be you—unless you invite him, of course. The story of Job makes it abundantly clear that the devil can do nothing to you without God's express permission.

What's more, the right attitude on your part can actually turn the bad times to your advantage. So even if some of your circumstances have a devilish flavour, it is only because the Lord knows that you can strike a blow at Satan by milking those circumstances of their potential blessing.

God and Satan, remember, are not equals. God is firmly in charge, and he is *for* you, not against you. Take courage!

## In good company

In fact, your dream-defying problems place you in good biblical company.

Consider Joseph for a moment. Were his dreams of family leadership from God? Most certainly. Then why, just when his course seemed set fair, did things go so drastically wrong?

Recall what happened. His jealous brothers first threw him into an empty water cistern, scaring him half to death as they planned his murder. Then, thinking better of it, they sold him to some passing traders who carried him far away from the family he was destined to lead, right down to Egypt, where he was sold as a slave.

The dream had promised *leadership*; the circumstances provided *slavery*. The two are complete opposites!

It was the same later on with Moses. His dream was to deliver his fellow-Israelites from bondage in Egypt—and the dream was from God. But as soon as Moses began to act on the dream by taking the part of an Israelite in dispute with an Egyptian, things went radically wrong. He ended up fleeing the country as a fugitive and taking up sheep-farming in Midian, miles away from the very people whom the dream told him he would rescue. How odd!

Abraham, the father of the Israelites and of all believers, had fared little better. It was very nice to be told by God that he would be the father of many nations, but all the circumstances proclaimed otherwise. He and Sarah were childless and, what's more, they were both near-centenarians. So Abraham's dream seemed to die circumstantially almost as soon as it was born. Like yours, perhaps?

## Still more setbacks

Then something else tends to happen. As if the initial circumstantial battering isn't enough, the adverse circumstances always seem to be *repeated*. Apparently God isn't content to give the dream a knockout blow; he seems determined to kill it stone dead.

Poor Joseph! Being sold as a slave had been bad enough, but just when things were taking a turn for the better he was struck by a bolt from the blue even more severe: he was thrown into prison.

It wouldn't have been quite so bad if, through some slip-up, he had *deserved* to be jailed. But he wasn't guilty of even the most petty crime. In fact his behaviour had been exemplary:

he had firmly yet courteously stuck to his moral principles in the face of repeated attempts by his master's wife to lure him into her bed.

God must have been very pleased indeed with such a righteous moral stand. If we had been God we would no doubt have rewarded Joseph in some way—fixing a promotion or steering some extra cash in his direction, perhaps, or bringing the seductive woman to a place of true repentance and faith.

But what actually happened? She turned sour, told lies about Joseph to her husband, and our hero finished up behind bars.

‘Where’s God in all this?’ he might well have complained. ‘What kind of reward is this for my faithfulness and high morality? And as for my dream, how on earth can I ever see it fulfilled under lock and key? What went wrong? Were my dreams just “cheese dreams” after all?’

## Understanding God’s ways

Similar questions have probably crossed your own mind, if not your lips. You have done everything right. You have remained faithful to the Lord and to his Word, often under severe pressure. You have done your best to overcome evil with good.

And the result? Major circumstantial difficulties, and any likelihood of your dream’s being fulfilled apparently growing more remote by the minute.

Don’t despair! It’s just that you don’t know God and his ways as well as you thought. The renewing of your mind according to his Word (Romans 12:2) isn’t as far advanced as

you believed. Simply reading this chapter, however, has hopefully moved you a little further along that road.

The main thing is that God *was* with Joseph, even in his hard and puzzling circumstances. He is with you, too, even though it might not seem like it right now.

Joseph believed God and held on to his dream. Be encouraged, and hold on to yours.