

Keep Your Dream Alive

*Lessons from the
Life of Joseph*

ERWIN W. LUTZER

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*To Lynn,
our second gift from God,
who loves her family, loves her friends,
but most of all loves her God.*

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ONE

YOU AND YOUR DREAM

I have a dream!" Martin Luther King became famous for his ability to inspire his followers by communicating his dream for racial equality in the United States. Long after he died, his dream has lived on, for God-given dreams do not die easily.

Each of us has a dream, a desire to fulfill some special purpose in our lifetime. Some of our dreams come to pass, others are ruined by our own foolish decisions or the failures of others. All of us live with both fulfilled and unfulfilled dreams.

This is a book about dreams, specifically *your* dream, whether shattered or fulfilled; whether small or large; whether past or present. Since nothing happens unless we dream, this is a book that invites us all to keep our dream alive.

In these pages we will learn about the dreams of a young man who was rejected by his family, betrayed by his brothers, and sent to prison because he was falsely accused of attempted rape. And yet twenty years after his emotional roller coaster began, the dream he had as a teenager was fulfilled.

God, we shall learn, does not only give dreams, but fulfills them. And even our most shattered dreams are not beyond the range of His sovereign providence. The fact that you are alive means that there is still at least one dream left for you. And there may be many more.

The word *dream* has two different meanings in our culture.

The first refers to those powerful images we have when asleep; those vivid nocturnal flashes that we may or may not remember in the morning. My dreams are full-color presentations, often with huge gaps in logic or a disjointed association of ideas. On rare occasions my dreams are so vivid and rational that I will later confuse them with reality.

Seminars are offered today to help us interpret these dreams. Gurus tell us that these dreams are the clue to who we are and what our future holds. But uncovering the origin of such dreams is not easy. Usually they have no special significance but are only expressions of the bits and pieces of experiences we had while awake.

God doesn't usually communicate with us by such dreams these days, primarily because we have all the information we need in His Word. The author of the Book of Hebrews makes a distinction between the Old Testament means of communication and today: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Heb 1:1-2).

God used many methods in the Old Testament: visions, intuitions, and dreams, to name a few. But today He speaks through Christ and the revelation Christ brought with Him. Certainly on occasion God may still speak to one of His people through a dream, but we must be very cautious about thinking that all dreams need interpretation, or that secular man has the ability to analyze a dream or understand its significance.

This book is about dreams of another kind, namely the aspirations, goals, and future visions we have for ourselves. We need not think that such dreams are of lesser importance. Edgar Allan Poe was quite right when he wrote, "Those who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream by night." Perhaps your dream is of a special vocation (my wife has always dreamed about being a nurse and now her dream is being fulfilled); others dream about a romantic relationship, or about living in a certain country or fulfilling some unique role in the arts, government, or other area of influence. Some people who have been abused or are going through a divorce simply dream that some day they will be emotionally whole.

Here are several observations about these dreams.

First, *we may have many dreams for ourselves*. As a teenager my dreams changed several times, from policeman to airplane pilot to politician—sometimes all three simultaneously. As we grow older, our dreams begin to take shape; most are eliminated as we begin to match our abilities with our opportunities. Still, everyone has dreams. Most people suffer, not from having too many dreams, but from having too few.

Second, *there are big dreams and little ones*. If our lesser dreams are unfulfilled, this does not disrupt the big picture of our lives. A trip might be canceled because of a shortage of funds; a romance turns sour. These and many other disappointments can be endured without our being derailed in our efforts to fulfill a larger vision. Shattered small dreams may amount to little more than tiny spots in the picture we are painting on the canvas of our lives.

When a big dream is shattered, our portrait of who we are and what we can do is marred, sometimes beyond recognition. The end of a marriage, terminal illness that wipes out our future, the belief (usually false) that we can never recuperate after experiencing rejection and abuse—such major disappointments bring our dreams to a crushing end. The future is then feared, not welcomed.

Third, *our dreams can be shattered by our own sins or the failures of others*. Millions have had their dreams ruined by other people, or by the harsh reality of circumstances. If you or I had been born in an underdeveloped country, our dreams would be severely hampered by the grim reality of starvation, unemployment, and lack of education. Perhaps our only dream would be to survive one more day.

It goes without saying that our own dreams have to be revised from time to time. Unexpected tragedies, failing health, and a dozen other disappointments all stand ready to abort our cherished dreams. Rosalynn Carter, the wife of the former president, wrote about the death of some of their relatives and her husband's loss of the 1980 election: "If we have not achieved our early dreams, we must either find new ones or see what we can salvage from the old.... There is clearly much left to be done, and whatever else we are going to do, we had better get on with it" (*Time*, Sept. 20, 1989).

There are as many shattered dreams as there are people in this world. Talk to your neighbor, take a friend to lunch, or listen to the prayer requests at your local church and you will hear a whole litany of disappointments. Our expectations are generally higher than reality allows. Somewhere around you

right now, someone's dream is bursting like a soap bubble, leaving no clues as to how it can be restored.

But if you no longer dream, you have lost your purpose for living. Dreams are the carrot on the stick that give us a reason to live until tomorrow. A dream causes us to reach beyond today in the belief that God is not finished with us yet. That's why a business friend of mine prays each morning, "O Lord, keep me alive until I'm dead!"

This book rests on four basic truths.

1. The fact that we are alive is proof that God still has a dream for us.

The only people who no longer dream are those who are dead. Of course our dreams must be scaled down to the reality of our age, health, and background. But a dream is nothing more than hope, even if it be only a reason to have a meaningful tomorrow.

One of the most heartbreaking letters I have ever received came from a man in prison, who said that he was totally alienated from his family. He had been beaten by an alcoholic father, and had often been scorned and mocked. He was sexually and physically abused by two members of his own family. The shame and rejection was unbearable. At the age of twelve, he was placed in a group home, where he experienced more abuse. He spent much of his life in various mental hospitals, in restraints and pumped full of medication.

When he heard a message I preached on "Touching the Untouchable," he wanted to scream and cry but feared he would be put into total seclusion. Here's what he wrote:

I no longer care if the world knows; they are the ones who are sick for not accepting someone who has been berated and humiliated like this. Christians do it also; this is why I have never been able to trust, or feel that anyone cares much. I have never really known peace or true love. I am angry because of the injustices I see; I've been told a million times to quit justifying myself for the actions I have taken, but people do not understand.

I wish I were dead. I wish I had never seen life. I wish that God had never created man. I see life as darkness without any escape.

I've always hated Christians because no matter how many times I have asked Jesus Christ to help me, I feel like I'm making it by a strand of hair. I have read the Bible and memorized Scripture, but I'm not able to trust and accept God or His Word. I feel that I am not one of God's chosen, I feel eternally damned and even separated from God most of the time. But I still believe with a small amount, and I hope He cares.

My emotions are in chains and irons. I wish I could have received your help long ago, but I was always looking for your failures. I still can't believe that anyone would ever want me.

Life has dealt all the blows I can take. I don't know how to love, all I can think about is the vicious so-called society, the crooked government which plays a big part in what happens. I have become bitter and remorseful. I want to see someone so bad; I wish I could have someone to hold and believe in, someone who could trust God with me.

I am sick of living, I wish there were an escape, or just a dream that I would awake some day. Help me!

Heartbreaking though his story is, thousands can identify with the depth of his pain. Here is a man whose dream was shattered by the sins of others. He has a right to be angry. Does God still have a dream for this man? Yes, there is hope for him; he still has a reason to live.

Joseph can give this man a small glimmer of hope. A thin ray of light shines from a prison in Egypt to his prison cell in New Jersey. As far as we know, Joseph did not have to cope with sexual abuse, exploitation, and prolonged incarceration, but he was unjustly punished and spent two years in a primitive cell, bound “in the stocks.” Yet God was with him.

Many people who see their dreams shattered give up dreaming. But God can replace the broken dream with one of His own.

My experience has been that many people give up on their dreams too easily. It is always too soon to quit. Our dreams include both laughter and weeping for we know both the pain of what is and the possibilities of what could be.

Through the life of Joseph, we will learn that God is constantly redefining, adjusting, or substituting other dreams for those that are unfulfilled. Yet His special dream—for Joseph and for each of us—survives.

2. We must let God reveal His dream for us.

Through prayer and a study of His Word, we can develop an intimacy with God that will give us hope in the midst of any circumstances. Perhaps God’s present dream is just that you will become a worshiper, someone who spends quality time ascribing worth to God. Eventually, you may be able to serve in other ways, to build relationships and seek a career. Today

your dream is private, just between you and God.

Or perhaps your dream will someday be fulfilled but it is now being postponed or redirected. Some who are reading these pages will discover that God may give them a new dream, one they had never thought of before. But every one of us can still dream.

One of the questions that I will try to answer from the story of Joseph is: How can we tell the difference between God's dream for us, and our own dreams for ourselves? That difficult question is not easily answered, but we must try.

3. We all must live with unfulfilled dreams.

Many people think that they must be forever frustrated, simply because the circumstances of life have denied them the dreams they once had. Not so. Even those of us who have had the good fortune of seeing many of our dreams fulfilled, still must become resigned to the fact we will not be able to do all we hoped, or fully become the persons we dreamed we would be.

The question is not whether we will have unfulfilled dreams, but rather how we will accept the loss. As the saying goes, our disappointment may be God's appointment for us. We may be confused by the barriers strewn across our path, but for God who sees the end from the beginning, there's a path even in a jungle.

4. Nothing can thwart a dream if God has chosen it for us.

With the full knowledge that there are many people who have had their dreams shattered by the sins of others, I still insist that nothing, except our own disobedience, can ruin the dream that God has for us. God takes all of these human

failures into account when He gives us a dream. The dream is adjusted to fit our family history, injustices, and trials. As necessary, God revises our dreams to fit our circumstances.

Joseph, we shall learn, was given a dream by God, a dream that died many times before it was fulfilled. But because God had given it to him, it was eventually fulfilled, though it took more than twenty years!

If we could interview Joseph he would tell us, "God is bigger than the failures of your parents, your siblings, or an unjust verdict in a courtroom."

Then he would go on to explain, "God uses evil for His own ends when we have the faith to see the larger picture of His will and purpose."

There is a time to live, a time to die. There is also a time to dream.

That time is now.