

A Few Good Men: Joseph : When life isn't turning out as planned

(Genesis 39:1-23)

Do you enjoy dreaming? Do you ever remember your dreams? Do they ever reoccur? Have you ever dreamed about dreaming? Have you ever thought about sharing a dream? Thursday night we went to see *Inception* at the Imax in London. I will never think about dreams in the same way again. *Inception* is probably the most complicated, the most fast paced and dramatic sci-fi thriller you will ever see. And on the biggest screen in the world it was one amazing experience. The premise is that professional thieves called “extractors” can invade people’s dreams to steal information via a drug-induced sleep that is shared by two or more people. From the ingenious mind of British filmmaker Christopher Nolan, *Inception* begs the question: what if you could share a dream with someone? Long before Christopher Nolan dreamed up the imaginary world of *Inception*, the Bible encourages us to dream, to imagine, to have visions of the future and to share the experience.

'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.'" (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28)

Now I think Joel is talking more about ‘day dreaming’ than he is about night dreaming. You can't do much about dreams at night but you can during the day. While ‘day dreaming’ is mostly associated with negative connotations, I believe Christians should consciously and actively cultivate the art of day dreaming. One of the ways we dream or imagine the future is by meditating on what God says in Scripture about the future. Another important way is by observing others.

We learn from those who are ahead of us, who are more mature, older, wiser, more insightful, perceptive, visionary. People who are further ahead in their spiritual journey than we are. Here are a few verses that explain this process. Jesus said: “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” (John 13:15). Peter writes: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21) Paul also writes: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Beside godly leaders we can also learn from fallen heroes. Jonathan Aitken once said, 'If it falls to me to start a fight to cut out the cancer of bent and twisted journalism in our country with the simple sword of truth and the trusty shield of British fair play, so be it.'

Aitken inspired a lot of people when he launched his libel action in 1997. Only after he lost his court case, was convicted for perjury and sent to prison, did he come to his senses and put his trust in Jesus Christ. Paul writes, “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.” (1 Corinthians 10:6). The writer to the Hebrews points us back to the Old Testament heroes with these instructions:

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our

eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 11:39-12:2).

So we are not alone. We fix our eyes on Jesus. We are surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses, cheering from the heavenly stands...But imagine if they could step out of that great crowd of witnesses in heaven, which Hebrews describes, and come down on to the track to run with us what would they say? This Summer, we are considering some of the 'heroes' of the faith: Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Caleb and Daniel. We want to let them speak to us. We want to "hear their stories to turn our modern day challenges into victories."

Besides Richard Coekin's book, *A Few Good Men*, I'd also like to commend John Maxwell's book, *Running with the Giants* as he includes examples of women leaders too. Maxwell says:

"We need what these men and women have to offer, because the race you and I are running ... has an eternal impact. Together you and I can run with the giants for a while to receive their inspiration, wisdom and empowerment. We need that, because encouragement is the oxygen of the soul. Read slowly, breathe deeply, and run faithfully."

Joseph was a dreamer. God gave him dreams and the ability to interpret dreams. So what might Joseph say to us if he were here this morning? "Dreams are conceived long before they are achieved... between the birth of a dream and its realization is always a process. The period is filled with doubts, adversity, changes and surprises. During the process, you will experience good days and bad... frequently you will be faced with a dilemma: Do you give up, or go on? Without hesitation, I can give you the answer. Don't give up on your dreams." (John Maxwell).

What principles can we learn from Joseph if we are to take our God-given dreams all the way? I want to pick out three tests God gave Joseph in the realization of his dream.

1. The Test of Adversity: Joseph learnt to submit to God while in the pit (Genesis 37). Lesson 1 - Don't give up on your dreams even if you don't start off well

Joseph's dreams came early. He was just 17 (Genesis 37:2-5). Joseph's dreams generated more enthusiasm than wisdom. His family did not react well to his dreams because of the way he shared them. God tells us that his father responded, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" (Genesis 37:10)

And his brothers' response was hardly supportive, "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams." (Genesis 37:19-20)

Sometimes it is not wise sharing your dreams too soon.

As we shall see from September when we explore the story of Nehemiah, he was older and wiser than Joseph when God gave him a dream of rebuilding Jerusalem. "I went to Jerusalem and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem." (Nehemiah 2:11-12)

Joseph was young. He was immature. And so, God helped him to grow up. He was not only misunderstood by his family, he was sold into slavery and forced to work in a foreign country far from home. Maligned, he was thrown into prison where he was forgotten. Why didn't Joseph give up? Because "The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered... (Genesis 39:2); "But while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness..." (Genesis 39:21) "...the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did." (Genesis 39:23). Get the message? Like Joseph, sometimes we say things we shouldn't say. Sometimes we do things we shouldn't do. And so God sends adversity to purify our motives, refine our dreams and prepare us to realise our visions. So when you find yourself in a pit, maligned or misunderstood, allow it to make you better not bitter. Adversity builds character. We do not have to remain a victim of our past. The story of Joseph shows what God can do despite our upbringing. Whatever you do, don't give up on your dreams even if you didn't start well.

The favour of God and his own integrity won Joseph the admiration and trust of his master. He was made overseer of the entire household. He had come into a privileged position. Joseph had passed the test of adversity. If Satan cannot get us to sin by withholding our needs, he will try to by offering us what we desire. The test of adversity led to:

2. The Test of Allurement: Joseph learnt to submit to God while in prison (Genesis 39-40). Lesson 2 - Don't lose your focus when temptations and distractions come.

Sexual attraction is probably as strong an urge as the will to survive. Like adversity, it is both test and temptation. As we saw last week the difference is, God wants to build us up while Satan wants to tear us down. Allurement either makes or breaks us. Joseph found himself in a very difficult situation.

Everything conspired to make sin easy and resistance near impossible. He was a slave living in a society devoid of moral values, far away from home, alone with a powerful, attractive and assertive woman – quite a combination. Several things we can note about this temptation:

It was totally unexpected

It came from an unexpected quarter – the wife of his master. She took the initiative. Joseph was taken by surprise. So it is with temptation. Satan does not wait until we have our armour on. Totally unexpected.

There was daily repetition

We are told she spoke to Joseph every day. That made it harder to say 'no'. Resistance can easily be worn down by persistence. Totally unexpected. Daily repetition.

There was a favourable opportunity

On this occasion there was no other man in the house. They were alone. This is how Satan works. At any other time there was the danger of detection but now the coast was clear. No one need know. Totally unexpected. Daily repetition. Favourable opportunity and

Personal advantage

For someone in Joseph's position, although fraught with danger, a special relationship with his boss's wife might be something he could turn to personal advantage. This was the test Joseph faced. How did he pass the test of allurements?

2.1 Joseph was loyal to God

Desire is not synonymous with sin. Temptation is not the same thing as sin. It only becomes sin when we gratify legitimate desires through illegitimate means. God has given us clear boundaries. When we break them it becomes sin. Joseph saw this for what it is - 'sin against God' (Genesis 39:10). When we sin, we sin first and foremost against God. Four times the text says "the Lord was with Joseph" Joseph was loyal to God.

2.2 Joseph was shocked by sin

Others might regard it as a little fling but Joseph called it what it was – 'a wicked thing' (Genesis 39:10). Our greatest security against sin is to be shocked by it and call it what it is.

2.3 Joseph fled temptation

"he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house." (Genesis 39:12). Joseph escaped the physical presence of temptation. Sometimes that is the only way. Joseph was rewarded, but not in the way he necessarily expected. He was in prison but he was free on the inside. Joseph had passed the first two tests: The Test of Adversity: Joseph learnt to submit to God while in the pit (Genesis 37). Lesson 1 - Don't give up on your dreams even if you don't start off well. Second, the Test of Allurement: Joseph learnt to submit to God while in prison (Genesis 39-40). Lesson 2 - Don't lose your focus when temptations and distractions come. If Joseph could not be tricked into bitterness through adversity nor adultery through the allurement, how would he fair under advancement?

He had to experience 13 years of adversity in order to be ready for a momentous responsibility – to save his people. Because God enabled him to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh, Joseph was honoured with the most senior position in all of Egypt.

3. The Test of Advancement: Joseph learnt to submit to God while in Power (Genesis 41). Lesson 3 - Don't give up on God even when your dreams begin to come true

Not everyone could have coped with such sudden elevation in power and prosperity. The discipline of those thirteen hidden years was not wasted. Joseph was given an Egyptian name "Zaphenath Paneah" meaning Saviour of the World.

God protected him, gave him supernatural ability to interpret dreams and showered him with honour, power and influence. What would Joseph do with all this power? Use it or abuse it? Slowly the links in God's providential plan were becoming visible as Egypt went through seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Few Bible stories are so moving and dramatic as the reuniting of their family, when Joseph's brothers came to Egypt in desperation looking for food. Why did he treat them with kindness and not retaliation?

His one desire was reconciliation, but before he could reveal himself, he must first find out if there had been repentance. He wanted to renew their relationship based on trust not fear. His plan therefore was intended to awaken their consciences and that is what happened. In chapter 42 we read,

"They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us." (Genesis 42:21)

God brought them to repentance and eventually Joseph revealed himself with gentleness and concern for their welfare. He also reveals his understanding of God's sovereign purposes in all that had happened.

"do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance... You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives (Genesis 45:5-7; 50:20)

Here is genuine humility "God sent me...God sent me..." Here is a clear declaration of faith "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good." Joseph had passed all three tests. The adversity test. The allurements test and the advancement test. It had taken 23 years from the dream to fulfilment. But in the end, Joseph did lead his family. He was reconciled to his brothers. He did save his people.

But that wasn't the end of his dreams. On his deathbed he had another. It's found in Genesis 50. He "spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt" (Hebrews 11:22). He was still consumed by a vision even on his death bed. But the significance of Joseph's part in God's providence goes much, much, further. I don't know if you have ever observed how the parallels between Joseph and Jesus are quite remarkable.

It is as if Joseph's life were a dress rehearsal for Jesus. Think about it: Both had a special birth. Both were begotten by God. Both were loved more by their father than their brothers. Both became good shepherds. Despised and rejected by their own, they both brought God's blessing to the Gentiles.

Their brethren planned for both a cruel death. Stripped of their robes, both were consigned to a grave not intended for their burial. Both graves were found to be

empty. Both had been sold at the instigation of one of the 12 – Judas is the Greek for Judah. The price for both was measured in silver, the price of a slave. Allowing for inflation the price paid for Joseph and Jesus was the same. Both were taken to Egypt. Both ministered to those in prison. Both were exalted to the King's right hand. Both were given the title "Saviour of the world" before either had saved a soul. Neither was recognised by their brethren. Both loved their enemies. Both had exclusive control over the bread of life. No one could be saved without bowing the knee to them. Joseph was indeed therefore a sign of God's providential preparation for the coming of his only Son.

Three lessons from Joseph that help us realise our dreams.

Lesson 1 – The Adversity Test: Don't give up on your dreams even if you don't start off well.

Lesson 2 – The Allurement Test: Don't lose your focus when temptations and distractions come.

Lesson 3 – The Advancement Test: Don't give up on God when your dreams begin to come true.

We learn from Joseph that no path of adversity is too narrow that it can separate us from him. No night is so dark that the light of Christ will be extinguished. No temptation is so great that he will not provide a way of escape. No situation is so dire that he is unable to use it for our enrichment and his glory.

This morning we have considered Joseph's dreams. But what about yours? Have you shared them with anyone? Christopher Nolan wasn't the first to imagine the possibility of shared dreams in his film, *Inception*.

We share a common dream – a glorious vision of the future. Several years ago we encouraged the church family to dream dreams of where we believe God would have us be as a Church, rooted in the Scriptures and inspired by the Holy Spirit. The dreams you shared about the future helped us create our 2020 Vision and our Five Year Plan. If you have forgotten that dream, pick up a copy in the entrance or [view it online](#), and by God's grace, help us make it come true. And join us this evening to hear Bill Hybels talk about "Vision to die for"

Lets pray: Sovereign Lord, I don't ask you to relieve every pain I have or am experiencing; I ask that you fulfil your purposes in and through me. Make your dream for our lives vivid in our minds, and give us the will to realise your plans for our families and your church, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.