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A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

A NOTE ON DREAMS IN REFERENCE TO GENESIS 37-44

Everyone dreams. There are 21 recorded dreams in the Bible, with most in the Old Testament, and only six in the New. Dreams can be described as a state of consciousness characterized by sensory, cognitive and emotional occurrences during sleep. Dreams are visual stories and images that our subconscious minds create while sleeping. They can be entertaining, fun, romantic, disturbing, frightening, and sometimes even bizarre.

In Job 33:15, the prophet Job defines dreams by the following: "In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the falleth upon men . . ." Here, dreams are visions of the night that occur when deep sleep falls upon us. Visions, as the Bible suggests, occur when someone is awake, while dreams occur when someone is asleep.

Although the Bible speaks of both dreams and visions, it is not always apparent the distinction between the two. Visions may comprise of dreams, but dreams are not visions. Dreams are flights of fancy. Visions are directives. Besides Jacob's dream of the ladder, we find the main elaboration on dreams in the book of Daniel, with Nebuchadnezzar's two dreams, and a particular focus on Joseph's dreams and interpretations in Genesis. The main difference between visions and dreams in the Bible is that dreams are received while the person is sleeping, and visions are received while the person is awake or as the Bible suggests, "in the Spirit."

Sometimes we may even wake up mad, sad or scared, and after a while realize it was all just a dream. The Bible speaks on this in Isaiah 29:8 when it says, "It will be as when a hungry man dreams – and behold, he is eating; But when he awakens, his hunger is not satisfied, or, as when a thirst man dreams – and behold, he is drinking, but when he awakens, behold, he is faint and his thirst is not quenched."

The reality is, dreams may appear real, but they are not. That does not mean they aren't inspirational or instructional. While dreaming, God not only opens our ears, but also makes us aware of our faults and gives instruction on the best ways to move forward. We can learn a lot through these instructions, we just have to be open to listening to what is being said.

Dreams are one of the tools used by God to break down our walls of self-defense. Since they are produced through our subconscious, they normally bypass our self-defense mechanisms and our preconceived notions about our strengths and weaknesses and go right to the truth of the matter. In this state, they allow us to see the true motives and conditions of our hearts, where we have the opportunity to listen to God and enter a whole new place of healing.

God also uses dreams to open our ears, especially since we aren't always open to hearing His voice. Most of the time our busyness makes it difficult to feel the tug of the Holy Spirit trying to get our attention. While God speaks to us when we set aside time for prayer and meditation, He also speaks in moments when we can barely hear ourselves think. Because dreams are often formed from thoughts and images in our minds, they often show us the sin in our hearts that our conscious minds refuse to acknowledge and reveal the struggles within.

While biblical prophets like Daniel and Joseph are recognized for their dreams, dreams have also been used as warnings against the deceit of false prophets. In Jeremiah, God ridicules and warns, "I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed." (Jeremiah 23:25)

At different times of life or during different experiences, our dreams might change. The bereaved often dream of their deceased loved ones. Many believe grief dreams are God's way of assuring their loved ones are at peace and to not worry about them. They are a form of closure, especially for those who were not present at the time of death.

Grief dreams play an important role in healing our grief. During the day, we can distract ourselves with various activities, but when we sleep, we are more relaxed and open. That's when our unconscious minds are free to wander and process the emotions that may be pushed to the back during the stress of the day.

A 2014 study in the American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Care examined the impact of dreams on the bereaved and found that "dreams of the deceased occur frequently and can be highly meaningful and further healing from a loss." Themes in grief dreams include, "past memories or experiences, seeing the deceased as free of illness, memories of the deceased's illness or time of death, the deceased in the afterlife appearing healthy, comfortable and at peace as well as the deceased communicating a message."

Researchers have identified four of the most common types of grief dreams. The first are visitation dreams where the deceased loved one comes to spend time with their living loved ones. Second are message dreams, where the deceased appears in our dreams to give us information, alert us to a situation, or to simply tell us they love us. Third are Reassurance dreams, in which the message shared is comforting and positive. Finally, there are trauma dreams, which occur when the deceased dies from murder or an accident.

In essence, all grief dreams are visits from our loved ones and they feel very real. Here, the deceased appear healthy, whole again, and younger than when they died. The message they bring is usually one of reassurance and comfort. Sometimes the message might contain a warning or some special guidance. Some describe the communication with the deceased as being telepathic since no actual words are exchanged. They tend to arouse strong emotions for the dreamer and ultimately help them to cope better and can be spiritually transformative.

Sometimes these dreams rarely need any interpretation as they speak for themselves. What we do know about them is that they are a normal part of grieving and have the ability to soothe, comfort, and heal those who mourn.

Dreams may also help people learn more about their feelings, beliefs, and values. The imagery and symbols that appear within them have meanings and connections that are specific to each person.

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