

Joy-ful CHRISTmas fo you!

Note: This column is a follow-up to last Sunday's sermon, which is attached at the end. I'm sending this *Laptop* out a day earlier than usual, and I hope to see those of you in Columbia at our **CHRIST**mas Eve service tomorrow evening at 6:30

How God Speaks to Us

I suspect that one of the things many of us yearn for more than nearly any other is the sense of God's direction in our lives. There are many books that address this topic, one of the very best of which is Dallas Willard's *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*. It's in its fourth edition, and I've read all of them.

God speaks to us in many ways, of course, and Elihu, the youngest of Job's friends, identified quite a number of these in Job 33:14-26:

¹⁴ *"For God does speak—now one way, now another— though no one perceives it.*

¹⁵ *In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they slumber in their beds,*

¹⁶ *he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, ¹⁷ to turn them from wrongdoing and keep them from pride, ¹⁸ to preserve them from the pit, their lives from perishing by the sword.*

¹⁹ *"Or someone may be chastened on a bed of pain with constant distress in their bones, ²⁰ so that their body finds food repulsive and their soul loathes the choicest meal. ²¹ Their flesh wastes away to nothing, and their bones, once hidden, now stick out. ²² They draw near to the pit, and their life to the messengers of death. ²³ Yet if there is an angel at their side, a messenger, one out of a thousand, sent to tell them how to be upright, ²⁴ and he is gracious to that person and says to God, 'Spare them from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom for them— ²⁵ let their flesh be renewed like a child's; let them be restored as in the days of their youth'— ²⁶ then that person can pray to God and find favor with him, they will see God's face and shout for joy; he will restore them to full well-being."*

That's a very interesting passage. Let's look at the various means of divine communication mentioned in these verses:

First, verse 15 talks about "**dreams and visions of the night**," which are described in many places in the Bible. Some of the most famous biblical dreams are the dreams Joseph had in Genesis that resulted in his being sold into slavery and then becoming the second-in-command in Egypt (Genesis 37). And the New Testament Joseph had dreams, too, dreams that told him not to be afraid to marry Mary, that told him to take his family to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous intent, that told him eventually to return to Israel, and then to take his family to Nazareth, where Jesus grew up (Matthew 1:20-21; 2:13-15, 19-23).

Second, beyond dreams, Job 33:16 tells us that God *speaks in their ears and terrifies them with warnings*. This verse refers to what I call "**spiritual promptings**." Examples of spiritual promptings in "the Christmas Story" include the promptings that caused both Simeon and Anna to meet and to bless the infant Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:27, 38).

Here's how spiritual promptings work: with or without any sense of an audible voice, you and I sometimes get a strong sense that we should do a particular thing or should not do a particular thing, and that sense persists. We may get a strong sense that we should call or visit a particular person, or that we shouldn't take a particular road or trip. Such impressions can, of course, be no more than passing thoughts or even superstition; but the more we know God's character and how God speaks, the less likely we are to misunderstand. And obeying such spiritual promptings not infrequently leads to some amazing experiences!

Third, Job 33:17 says that God *makes them turn from wrongdoing; he keeps them from pride*. The older I become, the more I agree with the ancient wisdom that regards pride as our root sin, from which all others grow. We don't have to look very hard at most sins to see and hear echoes of the serpent's hiss: "*You won't die! . . . You will become just like God*" (Genesis 3:4-5); and one of God's most effective means of protecting us from pride is **failure**.

Three of the most productive spiritual seasons of my life followed what felt to me like catastrophic failures, wounds to my pride that were excruciating-but-necessary soul surgery. And so it was that God worked in Joseph's life in Egypt through his years in slavery and in prison to turn him from pride and prepare him for leadership both national and international.

Fourth, Job 33:18 says that God *preserves them from the pit, their lives from perishing by the sword*. I'd call this fifth manner of speaking "**healing and rescue**." All of us are going to physically die, of course, and for those who are in Christ, that passage is not the End but is rather our Final Healing; yet sometimes God graciously chooses to heal our diseases and grants us additional years on earth so that our healing might provide testimony that draws others to our amazing God. Examples of such deliverance include God's saving of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace (Daniel 3) and Jesus' raising of Lazarus from death (John 11; see also Psalms 18 and 103).

The flip side of such healing is found in Job 33:19-22: ¹⁹ "*Or someone may be chastened on a bed of pain with constant distress in their bones,* ²⁰ *so that their body finds food repulsive and their soul loathes the choicest meal.* ²¹ *Their flesh wastes away to nothing, and their bones, once hidden, now stick out.* ²² *They draw near to the pit, and their life to the messengers of death.* The fifth way that God speaks to us is through **pain**.

We must be very careful here. Illness, suffering, and pain are by no means always to be understood as God's discipline any more than dreams are always messages from God (see John 9: 1-5). But in both cases, they may sometimes be so—though these are not conclusions we may make for each other. I'm unable to improve on the way C.S. Lewis put this in *The Problem of Pain*:

"The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it. Now error and sin both have this property, that the deeper they are the less their victim suspects their existence; they are masked evil. Pain is unmasked, unmistakable evil; every man knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt. . . . And pain is not only immediately recognizable evil, but evil impossible to ignore. . . . pain insists upon being attended to. **God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain:** it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

It was through pain that God worked to shape Paul's life and spirit, beginning on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19) and continuing through multiple trials and tribulations that left him never free from physical pain (2 Corinthians 11:22-12:10). And Paul's transformation has a great deal to do with the fact that you and I are followers of Jesus today.

As we come to the end of our text, Job 33:23-26 continues the idea of God's communication through ransom and healing, adding to it God's communication through angelic messengers.

Although the text applies this ransom to physical healing, it seems to me that this rescue should also be understood as being ransomed from the grave on the far side of death in addition to whatever ransom we may experience on the near side:

23 Yet if there is an angel at their side, a messenger, one out of a thousand, sent to tell them how to be upright, 24 and he is gracious to that person and says to God, 'Spare them from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom for them— 25 let their flesh be renewed like a child's; let them be restored as in the days of their youth'— 26 then that person can pray to God and find favor with him, they will see God's face and shout for joy; he will restore them to full well-being."

So now a sixth way God speaks to us is through **angelic messengers**. Indeed, the Bible exhorts us not to *forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it* (Hebrews 13:2). Angelic messengers appear throughout the Bible, from Genesis through Revelation, and it was, of course, from the angel Gabriel that Mary learned of God's amazing plans for her own life (Luke 2:26-38).

It seems to me that you and I usually recognize the truth of such encounters only in retrospect, even as did the men who met the Risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-34). Sometimes such meetings occur in the midst of life, as I think they have to some of my friends; but more often, I think, they happen when we draw near to that boundary across which eternity lies. Persons who are nearing death frequently experience unseen visitations that the rest of us can hear about but seldom see.

Finally, God frequently speaks to us through three other means that don't appear in Job 33. These three are **nature**, **Scripture**, and **God's indwelling Spirit**, and it is through these three that God speaks to us most often.

I doubt that any of us are strangers to God's speaking through the creation, and Psalm 19 eloquently affirms that *the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge* (19:1-2). Beyond this, Romans reminds us that *since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse* (1:20).

Second, the Bible affirms about itself that *all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:16-17), and God's clearest and most specific guidance frequently comes through this means (see Luke 24:27; Acts 8:30). And third, it is always through the work of God's Spirit who lives in us that we become able to understand the fullness of God's revelation through His Word, through creation, or through any of these other means (John 14:15-18, 16:13; Romans 8:9).

I want to end by focusing on Job 33:24, where it is written that *"I have found a ransom for them."* Because, as Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote of God some years ago, *He Is There, and He is not Silent*, you and I know that Bethlehem's Babe, Jesus of Nazareth, is both our ransom from death and our Soon-Coming King (see Isaiah 53 and Revelation 19:11-16). And because He has come, you and I can truly know who we are and become who we were created to be, both in time and in eternity.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians—my favorite biblical book—identifies at least ten characteristics of who we are and what we were created to be (see Ephesians 1:3-5 and 2:10). I invite you to let these things sink into your heart as we approach Bethlehem this week:

- (1) I am blessed;
- (2) I am loved;
- (3) I am chosen;
- (4) I am holy [set apart];
- (5) I am forgiven;
- (6) I am adopted;
- (7) I am pleasing to God;
- (8) I am God's masterpiece;
- (9) I am created anew;
- (10) I am created for a purpose.

It is so that you will know these things and so that you will allow God to make them real in your heart and mind that God speaks to you at all. Are you listening?

Thanks for the joy of sharing the journey with you!

Dave

Be the Gift!

“How God Speaks to Us” (2013)

Responsive Reading, “Joseph’s Dreams” (Matthew 1:18-21, 2:13-15, 19-23) ¹

It was the year 1865. Friedrich Kekulé, a German chemist, had been struggling for years to understand the chemical structure of trimethyl benzene. While pondering this puzzle, Kekulé had a dream in which a snake formed a circle by holding its tail in its mouth. This dream caused Kekulé to realize that the structure of benzene was more or less circular, and this discovery led to the beginning of structural organic chemistry.

It was Monday evening, November 23, 1654. Blaise Pascal was sitting quietly at home, thinking. Perhaps he was working on his famous book, *Pensées*—which means “Thoughts.” You may remember Pascal as that scientist who proved the existence of a vacuum, who discovered the mathematics of cycloids and conic sections, and who invented the calculating machine, the syringe, and the wrist watch.

The evening wore on, and at about 10:30 p.m., Pascal had an experience that changed his life forever. In fact, he penned these words about it, and carried them on a parchment around his neck for the rest of his days:

The year of grace, 1654
Monday, 23rd November
From about half past ten in the evening until half past twelve
FIRE
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
not of the Philosophers and savants.
Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. . . .
Forgetfulness of the world and of everything except God.
He is to be found only in the ways taught in the Gospel. . . .
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy
This is life eternal, that they might know Thee,
the only True God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent. . . .
I have fallen away: I have fled from Him, denied Him, crucified Him.
May I not fall from Him for ever.
We hold Him only by the ways taught in the Gospel.
Renunciation total and sweet
I will not forget Thy word. Amen.²

It was A.D. 49. A traveling evangelist named Paul was on a Preaching Mission. He had planned to preach in the province of Asia, but found those doors closed. His backup plan was to preach in the province of Bithynia, but again the doors were closed. As Paul struggled with what to do next, he had a vision in the night. In this vision, he saw a man from Macedonia in northern Greece, pleading with him, “*Come over to Macedonia and help us!*” (Acts 16:9). That vision took Paul across the Aegean Sea into Europe, where the Gospel eventually transformed the Roman Empire.

It was the year 2 B.C. A young Jewish carpenter couldn’t sleep. His fiancée had told him that she was pregnant, and he knew that he was not the father of this child. As he fell into a fitful sleep, an angel appeared to him in a dream and said, “*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:20-21).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship on December 22, 2013.

² J.M. Cohen, introduction to *Pensées* (Penguin Books, 1961).

Kekulé obeyed his dream, and *chemistry* has never been the same. Pascal obeyed his vision, and his *life* was never the same. Paul obeyed his vision, and *Europe* has never been the same. Joseph obeyed his dream, and the *world* will never be the same.

Joseph actually had four dreams that gave him direction as the earthly father of God's incarnate Son. We've already mentioned the first dream, the one that told Joseph to move forward with his plans for marriage. The second dream sent Joseph to Egypt with his family. The third dream brought them back to Israel, and the fourth dream sent Jesus' family to Nazareth, where Jesus grew up.³

God spoke to many persons in the Bible through dreams and visions. Nearly a hundred such revelations are mentioned. Dreams take place during sleep, while visions take place during wakefulness, but both are encountered at the boundary that lies at the edges of our consciousness.

William James was one of the pioneers in exploring consciousness as it relates to religious experience. More than a century ago he wrote that

our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness, as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness

No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question, for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. . . . At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.⁴

"That's all as may be," you say, **but "does God still speak through dreams in the twenty-first century"? Yes, he does.** Let me offer just a few examples of this, all among Muslims, where dream revelation is quite common in our time.

As you know, Ramadan is a great holy season among Muslims, and many Christians around the world pray with special focus for Muslims during the days of Ramadan. In November, 2002, the Yakan and Tausig peoples in the Philippines were special objects of prayer among Christians worldwide, and many of these people had dreams and visions of Jesus during that time.

One man had a dream of Mohammed and Jesus facing each other, but Mohammed could not look Jesus in the eye. The man asked his cousin, who is a Christian, about the meaning of his dream, and was told, "Your dream shows that Jesus is greater than Mohammed."⁵

A Muslim man named Ibrahim had three visions of Jesus a year apart, in 1987, 1988, and 1989. He described the third dream: "As I looked upon the face of Jesus at the top of the mountain, he was full of compassion and was smiling down upon me. The two angels were absent this time, but instead a vast multitude of people was present. We were going to where Jesus was, full of peace and joy. The next morning I sat down to meditate upon this most recent

³ Matthew 1:20-21; 2:13-15, 19-23

⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902, (New York: Mentor Books, 1958), p. 298.

⁵ Dale Thomson, ASSIST News Service, December 27, 2002.

dream. After these three years, I finally made an important decision to follow this Jesus who appeared to me these three times in such overwhelming love.”⁶

“D” is a young Muslim man who lives in Indonesia. One night during Ramadan in 1991 he dreamed that he was sitting with his arms tied to a chair. Then he saw a man he recognized as Jesus coming. Jesus touched the ropes and they fell from his arms. Jesus said to him, “Look for the pole.”

“D” didn’t understand the dream, and eventually forgot about it. But during Ramadan in 1993, he had another dream. In this dream Jesus said, “I told you to look for the pole. Why haven’t you done what I asked?” “D” asked, “Where is this pole?” Jesus pointed to a hill far away, and said, “Go, look for the pole.” In his dream, “D” ran through a jungle for a long time, finally coming to a clearing in which he saw a cross—which was the pole of which Jesus spoke.

“D” asked the leader of his mosque about the dream. The Imam told “D” to search for the truth. After another disturbing dream, “D” visited a pastor, who led him to Jesus.⁷
Does it sound as though God still speaks through dreams?⁸

The Bible seems to describe three kinds of revelatory dreams. The first kind of dream conveys **a straightforward message**, such as the four dreams that Joseph received about his young family and his miraculous son. A modern example of this kind of dream would be Ibrahim’s dream of Jesus’ joyful presence.

The second kind of dream involves **fairly simple symbolism** that can be understood without an interpreter. An example of this would be the Joseph’s dream in Genesis about the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowing down before him (Genesis 37). The dream about Jesus and Mohammed was similar to this.

The third kind of dream involves **complex symbolism that does require an interpreter**. Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams in Daniel 2 and 4 would be examples of such complex dreams, and “D’s” dream about searching for the “pole” was rather like this.⁹

The Hebrew Scriptures seem to regard dreams and visions as being just as valid as any other form of prophecy,¹⁰ and in fact the prophets frequently received their messages from God through dreams and visions. At the same time, the Bible also gives warning that not all dreams and visions come from God.

Moses spoke about “*false prophets and dreamers*” (Deuteronomy 13:5). Jeremiah castigated false prophets “*who prophesy false dreams*” (Jeremiah 23:32, also 23:28, 27:9, 29:8). And Zechariah lamented that “*diviners see visions that lie; they tell dreams that are false, they give comfort in vain. Therefore the people wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd*” (Zechariah 10:2).

Wisdom and discernment are obviously needed here, but since each of us spends about one-third of our lives sleeping, and sleep studies tell us that we dream during about twenty

⁶ www.isaalmasih.net/isa/dreamsofisa.html

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sigmund Freud “put dreams on the map” in 1900 with his groundbreaking book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900; New York: Avon Books, 1965) in which he called dreams “the royal road to the unconscious.” Carl Jung, another psychoanalyst, also gave a great deal of attention to dreams (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1973]).

⁹ John’s visions in Revelation were straightforward in his own day, but require wisdom in interpretation today. The symbolic structures of that day were quite unlike our own.

¹⁰ Numbers 12:6; Deuteronomy 13:1; 1 Samuel 28:6; Joel 2:28

percent of our sleeping time,¹¹ this means that most of us probably dream for as much as two hours each night, whether we remember our dreams or not. That's a lot of dreaming.

While there is no universally-accepted approach to understanding the meaning of dreams, I think that most experts who study dreams would agree that much of what we dream has to do with two broad kinds of content. First, **much of what we dream has to do with wish fulfillment**—especially with desires that we have not consciously acknowledged. Second, **much of what we dream grows out of problems or issues with which we're struggling, either consciously or unconsciously.** This was the case with nearly every dream I've mentioned this morning.

And finally, as was the case with dreams in the Hebrew Scriptures, the dreams you and I have are usually one of the three types we've mentioned: (1) dreams that have a **straightforward message**; (2) dreams that have **simple symbolism** that is easy to understand; and (3) dreams that have **complex symbolism** that requires an interpreter. In this week's *Laptop*, I'll mention several other ways in which God speaks to us; but in closing for this morning, I'd like to suggest six guidelines for paying attention to your dreams:

1. Most dreams do not represent revelation from God, though our dreams do frequently help us to understand ourselves more fully.
2. While God does occasionally speak through dreams, God speaks to us far more often and much more clearly through the words of the Bible.
3. God usually speaks to us through dreams when we're troubled, when we're struggling with some spiritual issue.
4. You'll remember more of your dreams if you intend to welcome them and to remember them, and if you keep a notepad by your bed so that you can write them down.
5. If you welcome your dreams, guidance from God will usually come through dreams that get your attention in some way, even if you don't understand their meaning at once.
6. Test your interpretation of your dreams against the clear teachings of the Bible and with the help of mature Christian friends.

Whenever God speaks to us, whether through dreams, through hymns, through Sunday School lessons, through worship, through nature, or through the Bible, you and I then have a choice to make: will we obey God, or will we not? **God can do no more in and through our lives than is made possible by our obedience.**

What might have happened if Joseph had ignored or refused to obey the guidance God gave him through those four dreams? As "D" discovered when Jesus told him to "look for the pole," God will not reveal any more of Himself and His plan to us until we've obeyed the instructions we've already been given.

So here's the take-away for this morning: **What guidance and instruction has God given to you through the Bible or in other ways that you have not followed?** What do you need to do about that? What do you need to do *right now*?

¹¹ Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens, *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (InterVarsity Press, 1997); <http://www2.ucsc.edu/dreams/FAQ/>.

Joseph's Dreams

Reader One: ¹⁸ *This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly (Matthew 1:18-19).*

Reader Two: ²⁰ *As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).*

Reader One: ¹³ *After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother," the angel said. "Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him" (Matthew 2:13).*

Reader Two: ¹⁴ *That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, ¹⁵ and they stayed there until Herod's death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: "I called my Son out of Egypt" (Matthew 2:14-15).*

Reader One: ¹⁹ *When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. ²⁰ "Get up!" the angel said. "Take the child and his mother back to the land of Israel, because those who were trying to kill the child are dead" (Matthew 2:19-20).*

Reader Two: ²¹ *So Joseph got up and returned to the land of Israel with Jesus and his mother. ²² But when he learned that the new ruler of Judea was Herod's son Archelaus, he was afraid to go there (Matthew 2:21-22a).*

Reader One: *Then, after being warned in a dream, he left for the region of Galilee. ²³ So the family went and lived in a town called Nazareth. This fulfilled what the prophets had said: "He will be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:22b-23).*