

“How God Speaks to Us”

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 here 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 go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. 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).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on December 19, 2010.

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.

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.³

"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."⁴

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 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."⁵

³ 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.

⁴ Dale Thomson, ASSIST News Service, December 27, 2002.

⁵ www.isaalmasih.net/isa/dreamsofisa.html

“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.⁶ Does it sound as though God still speaks through dreams?⁷

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 Old Testament Joseph’s dream about the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowing down before him (Genesis 37). “D’s” dream about searching for the “pole” was rather like 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 the dream about Jesus and Mohammed was a little like this.⁸

The Old Testament seems to regard dreams and visions as being just as valid as any other form of prophecy,⁹ 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 whose “*imaginary dreams are flagrant lies*” (Jeremiah 23:32, also 23:28, 27:9, 29:8). And Zechariah lamented that “*fortune-tellers predict only lies, and interpreters of dreams pronounce comfortless falsehoods. So my people are wandering like lost sheep without a shepherd to protect and guide them*” (Zechariah 10:2).

Wisdom and discernment are obviously needed here, so how shall we proceed? Since each of us spends about one-third of our lives sleeping, and sleep studies tell us that we dream during about twenty percent of our sleeping time,¹⁰ this means that most of us dream for well over an hour each night, whether we remember our dreams or not. That’s a lot of dreaming.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ 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]).

⁸ 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.

⁹ Numbers 12:6; Deuteronomy 13:1; 1 Samuel 28:6; Joel 2:28

¹⁰ Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens, *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (InterVarsity Press, 1997).

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 Old Testament, 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:¹¹

1. Most dreams do not represent revelation from God, though our dreams frequently help us 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 Underlined portions are to be filled in the handout with the worship order.

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).*