

THE DREAM MANAGER

Leaders Care for Dreams

Texts: Genesis 40 & 41

We're exploring this season the amazing story of the Old Testament character Joseph and what it has to teach us about the making of a leader. This could not be a timelier topic, I think. Our nation and church, our schools and workplaces, our families and friends need high quality leaders. They need people of good character and great vision and gutsy commitment to solve the problems and seize the opportunities before us. And God's plan is for us and those we influence to be those leaders.

In our FIRST study of this topic, I stressed that leaders are more often MADE than born. People frequently speak of certain others as "natural born leaders." But the truth is that most of the people who go on to be great leaders don't start out that way. They may have certain helpful gifts, but often have pretty significant character flaws that God needs to break down before they'll ever break through to a higher level of positive influence. For the biblical figure Joseph, it was an arrogance problem that was blocking his way toward greater leadership. What might be the block for you or the people you influence? Addressing those fatal flaws assertively is essential to the making of a leader.

In our SECOND installment, Eric and Mike helped us look at the way leaders are shaped through suffering. In their landmark book, *Cradles of Eminence*, Victor and Mildred Goertzel studied the childhood experiences of some 700 people who went on to be extraordinary leaders, trying to find common threads. What they found was that almost every one of these high-leverage adults faced significant adversity when they were younger.¹ We certainly see that in the life of Joseph too. He's rejected and beaten and thrown into a pit by his brothers. He's enslaved and sold off as property by Arab traders. He's falsely accused, convicted, and imprisoned by the Potiphar family.

And yet rather than becoming more selfish or bitter, Joseph allows these experiences to humble him, to deepen his dependence on God, to teach him perseverance, and to open his heart toward the pains of others. In effect, he "descends UP." It's the gravity of his difficulties that become the occasion for being filled with grace. How does it work with you? Do you view your struggles as obstacles or opportunities? Could you be helping the people you influence shift their orientation toward adversity and suffering? This is another big part of the making of a leader.

Today I want to think with you about a THIRD quality of leadership still very much needed in our time. We live in a world where all the big problems and the hard practicalities and the risky probabilities can easily overrun our imagination and dim our vision. In our families and churches, our businesses and politics, we get stuck on the way things were or how things will always be or what can't be done. We forget that God is always coming to us from the future, from the realm of the undiscovered and the still-possible. And that is why one of the consistent messages of the Bible is that leaders

care for dreams. They are Dream Managers. They pay attention to the vision of the future God gives them and to the people around them. And in caring for those visions, they ascend to a place of even greater influence. I invite you to think about that with me today.

If you know the story of Joseph, then you know that he has at least two significant dreams when he is just a teenager. The dreams are of a future in which he will be a person of profound influence over the lives of others. In the dreams, Joseph sees sheaves of wheat (that represent his brothers) bowing down to him. He sees the sun, moon, and stars (that represent the whole family or perhaps the wider world) paying honor to him as well.

Because we know the end of the story, we know that these dreams will actually come true. As unlikely (if not impossible) as it sounds, this Hebrew child will one day become the head of agriculture and commerce in the neighboring nation of Egypt at a time of regional famine. This eleventh-born kid will rise to one of the preeminent positions of power in the ancient world and oversee a food storage and distribution program that will save untold numbers of people from starvation, including his siblings and parents. The fulfillment of this dream will preserve the family that will become the nation of Israel, that will give birth to Jesus Christ, that will result in the rise of Christianity, that will lead to the betterment of millions upon millions of others across the centuries, that will result in you and I being in this conversation today. Wow.

This is the first point I want to make about the kind of dreams God gives people and leaders care about. God-given dreams often depict outrageous outcomes in light of present reality. Imagine how these biblical characters must have felt when God first challenged them: "Noah, you're going to build a gigantic ark in the middle of a desert, but this boat will save you from the coming flood." "Sarah, I know you are an old woman, but out of your womb I am going to birth an entire new nation." "Moses, I know you are afraid of public speaking, but I will use you to convince Pharaoh to let my people go." "Nehemiah, I will use you to restore the ruined city of Jerusalem to its former glory." "Mary, I see you are but a peasant girl, but you're going to bear and raise the Savior of the world." "Saul, as a Christian, you will stop persecuting me and instead spread my gospel to the ends of the earth."

These are outrageous visions. Have you noticed that outrageous is all the rage in leadership circles today? "We're going to build the biggest, most beautiful wall you've ever seen and it's going to keep us secure." "We're going to give free college to everybody and it's going to lift everyone up." Politicians and business leaders alike have learned the power of picturing Big Hairy Audacious Goals ("BHAGs"). Daniel Burnham, the dreamer who envisioned the great city of Chicago, once famously said: "*Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood.*" In their book, *The Leadership Challenge*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner write, "Every organization, every social movement, begins with a [blood-stirring] dream. That dream or vision is the force that invents the future."

Think of the power of Dr. Martin Luther King's, I Have a Dream vision. And listen to the vision of some of these well-known organizations:

- Hilton—"To fill the earth with the light and warmth of hospitality."
- Avon—"To be the company that best understands and satisfies the product, service, and self-fulfillment needs of women—globally."
- CVS Caremark—"To improve the quality of human life."
- Kraft Foods—"To make today delicious."
- Toys 'R' Us—"To put joy in kids' hearts and a smile on parents' faces."²

Now, I can't vouch for the virtue of everything actually done by those companies, but I can tell you that the vision they are describing are outrageous dreams in the best sense. There are audacious visions of human flourishing. The difference between the ordinary dreams for success and privileges or comfort and celebrity so often marketed at us today and the kind of extraordinary dreams God implants in people is that God-given dreams are aimed at blessing others. Like putting Joseph in a position to feed millions of people in a time of famine, godly dreams advance God's passion to see his creatures and creation flourish.

I've also noticed that God-given dreams require God's power to fulfill them. In that sense, they are not really BHAG's so much as GSG's – God-Sized Goals. Those who have such visions are clear that unless the Lord is involved, their work is in vain (Psa 127:1). They say, "We've got to give this effort our absolute best, but if God doesn't work here, we'll never see this vision realized." The apostle Paul voiced this clearly at a time when the Corinthians were focusing too much on human ingenuity: **"What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants... as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow"** (1 Cor 3:5-7).

In recent days, God has impressed upon me some dreams for this church you'll hear me talk more about. I have a vision that God is going to use this congregation to extend flourishing to tens of thousands of people who will not flourish without us. I dream of us rooting ourselves so deeply in Christ that He makes us a gracious wave of life-changing love in this region and around the world. But I know I can't summon that future. I can only plant and water. It is God alone who brings the harvest.

Over the course of his struggles in life, Joseph came to believe less and less in his own genius and plans and more and more in the timing and providence of God. As we'll explore further next week, Joseph turned to just trying to be faithful in little things and trusting the big changes to God. When he couldn't seemingly do anything to advance his own dreams, he worked at helping others make sense of THEIR dreams. Joseph famously did that with the visions given to two of his fellow prison inmates. When one of those inmates was released, he forgot his promise to help Joseph, so Joe kept working and waiting faithfully for God to fulfill the dream he'd been given as a child (Gen 40:13-14).

And then, two years later, the door of the prison cell suddenly opened and Joseph found himself suddenly summoned into the presence of Pharaoh himself. **Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer."** (Gen 41:15-16) And, as we read earlier, Joseph unravels the mysterious dream and lays out a plan for surviving the coming famine that inspires Pharaoh to place Joseph in charge of the great work.

I was reminded recently that God has not stopped doing this sort of thing. In our congregation is a couple named Erik and Mary Lou. Erik began his career as a chemical engineer with DuPont. Over the years, God gave him more and more leadership experiences and exposure to business environments outside of the U.S. At the same time, God was allowing Mary Lou and Erik to experience some personal adversity and growing their heart for the needs of struggling people. Mary Lou led the way there, as their family got involved in hands-on service with a number of our local mission activities. Last year they traveled to Tanzania on a mission trip with some other members and saw how desperate was the need for help with agricultural development in Africa. A dream grew in them that God might somehow take all of their experiences and enable them to profoundly bless those hungry people. They thought it would be mainly by giving money. And then the summons came from Pharaoh, actually Basel, Switzerland: "Erik, we would like you to become CEO of Syngenta" -- one of the world's largest provider of seeds and fertilizers for the African continent. They left this week.

What's YOUR God-given dream? Believe me, it doesn't need to be to head up a multi-billion-dollar global enterprise. Every sphere of every size matters to God. Maybe he's laid on your heart a vision for a wonderful change in your marriage or family. Perhaps he's given you a dream for your workplace or an organization you serve. It could be that God is impressing upon you a picture of the grace and truth he wants to bring in your neighborhood or in an under-resourced place to which he's opened your eyes. Maybe he's calling you to run for political office or use some talent you've been burying.

Or perhaps, it's the dreams of others you are being called to interpret. One of the most intriguing books on leadership I've read in quite a while is entitled the Dream Manager by Matthew Kelly.³ It pictures a leader like many of us dream of having -- someone passionately committed to helping the people around them truly reflect on and live into their dreams -- and, as a surprising by-product, watches his or her own leadership influence exceed their dreams.

SO... How will you recognize that a dream you have comes from God? Well, it may seem outrageous in light of present circumstances. It will be aimed at blessing others in the way God's Word says he wants people to be blessed. And it will require God's power, as well as your faithful action, to make that vision a reality. If you can't recognize such a dream in yourself, ask what the people around you dream of being or doing and see if you can help them make that vision clearer. Pursue that course and like Joseph, or Mary Lou and Erik, or that other Dream Manager, you may find yourself caught up in a larger wave of grace than you'd even dared to imagine.

Two shoe salespersons were sent to a primitive island to determine business potential. The first one wired back, "Coming home immediately. No one here wears shoes." The second person responded, "Send a boatload of shoes immediately. The possibilities here are unlimited." What do YOU see when you look at the world around you? And what does God want you to see? How you answer that in days ahead is part of the making of YOU as a leader.

¹ Victor & Mildred Goertzel, *Cradles of Eminence* (Great Potential Press, 2004).

² James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), p. 18

³ Matthew Kelley, *The Dream Manager* (Hyperion, 2007).