

# 1

## Dreaming the Dream

*Jacob left Beer-sheba and set out for Haran. He reached a certain place and spent the night there. When the sun had set, he took one of the stones at that place and put it near his head. Then he lay down there. He dreamed and saw a raised staircase, its foundation on earth and its top touching the sky, and God's messengers were ascending and descending on it. Suddenly the LORD was standing on it and saying, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac."*

(Genesis 28:10-13)



# 1

## Dreaming the Dream

Each year when New Year’s Day rolls around, many of us find ourselves setting goals or resolutions for the new year. Lose weight, be on time for work, hit the gym three times a week, reduce yelling at the kids by 25 percent weekly and never yell on Sundays—the list goes on. Those might all be worthwhile goals, but we seriously need to ask ourselves: Am I thinking too small? Am I living the “just get by” plan, or is there a greater God-dream that, if lived to the fullest, could permeate and inform every move I make?

When I tell folks they need to discover God’s dreams and visions, many ask what I mean. My wife Carolyn knows. Frequently in this season of our lives I find myself turning to her and saying, “We are living the dream.” She knows I don’t mean a personal dream or financial dream or even the American dream. I mean something much bigger. It’s what Stanford University business professor Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great* and other notable business tomes, calls your BHAG: Big Hairy Audacious Goal.<sup>1</sup> I have had the opportunity to

make Jim's acquaintance by speaking at some of the same conferences. I once said to Jim, "I love your idea of the BHAG! In fact I have grabbed it and put my own spin on it. I call it your Big Hairy Audacious God-purpose." What I meant was that God has created each one of us with a particular purpose in his overall creative plan for the universe, and our task in life is to discover that purpose and fulfill it.

Since 1979, Carolyn and I have lived near Dayton, Ohio, hometown of Orville and Wilbur Wright. So, when I think about having a BHAG, the Wright brothers come to mind. Their BHAG was not their day job, which was running a bicycle shop in Dayton, but rather something that had not yet been accomplished: achieving human flight. Fixing bicycles was simply what they did to help fund the dream.

Having a BHAG doesn't have to be limited to the Wright brothers of the world. In Jeremiah 29:11, God says, "I know the plans I have in mind for you." God's plan for you is more than your day job; it's something bigger. It's the purpose God uniquely created for you, the piece you will add to God's mission on earth. In John 20:21, Jesus echoes God's words: "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you."

In *Dare to Dream* you will seek to discern God's purpose for your life, and you will create a life mission statement based on it. You might ask, "How will I recognize my God-purpose when I see it? How will I know it's from God and not from my own self-centered plans and desires?" Here's how: If the purpose is from God, it will always honor God, bless other people, and bring you joy. If it doesn't meet those three criteria, then it isn't a God-purpose, no matter how successful you are in accomplishing it.

Success isn't the key here; significance to the kingdom of God is. In the case of the Wright brothers, their purpose certainly has

enhanced the kingdom of God. It's their invention, for example, that enables me to be pastor at Ginghamburg on a weekend and then teach fellow pastors in Vietnam in the same week. It's what allows Jim Taylor, a longtime Ginghamburg member and automobile dealership owner, to accomplish his own God-purpose. Jim hosts micro-business seminars in Cuba, Cambodia, and Jamaica, while running his car dealership at the same time. Jim's God-purpose isn't the car business, although he is very successful at it. It is something so much bigger.

When we dare to dream, we can discern God's dreams for our lives, and following those dreams will help us discover our God-purpose and develop our life mission statement.

## **Jacob's Dream**

As an example of a God-dream, let's look at the story of Jacob in the Old Testament. Jacob eventually became a wealthy, successful businessperson in animal husbandry. In Genesis 28, however, he was on the lam (pun intended). Actually, Jacob had just deceived his elderly father Isaac into giving him the inheritance intended for his older brother Esau. Understandably, Esau was unhappy about his brother's deception, so their parents sent Jacob to stay with extended family for his own safety. We read, starting in Genesis 28:10, that Jacob left Beer-sheba and set out for Haran, about a 750-mile trip. Keep in mind that 750 miles was a significant journey in a time without any kind of motorized transportation.

As the night approached, Jacob stopped at a nondescript place, which the Scripture doesn't even give a name. Jacob took a stone lying nearby and placed it under his head in an attempt to sleep. This would certainly be the ideal setup for a night of restless sleep. Do you

ever have restless nights? Note that God often uses restlessness in our lives to get our attention and create change, especially when we find ourselves in a difficult situation. In his sleep, Jacob dreamed that he saw a stairway resting on the earth, its top reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it. In practical terms that dream doesn't make much sense. We know logically that there are no staircases or ladders connecting earth and heaven. But think about your dreams. How many of those at first don't seem to make sense?

In verses 13 and 14, Jacob saw God standing on the staircase, promising Jacob and his descendants the land on which Jacob was lying. God also promised that Jacob's offspring would become as numerous as the "dust of the earth" and that God would protect Jacob, never leaving him until the promise was fulfilled. Genesis 28:16-17 describes Jacob's reaction:

When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought to himself, The LORD is definitely in this place, but I didn't know it. He was terrified and thought, This sacred place is awesome. It's none other than God's house and the entrance to heaven.

As he did for Jacob, God has created for each of us a unique part to play in his creative plan. God is trying to get our attention, so we can live that plan, and God will not leave us until the plan is fulfilled in our lives. That is what I call "living the dream," and it is what I am experiencing in my own life. I am living God's dream for me, and I don't want you to miss yours! Life is too short.

### **From Self-selected to God-directed**

Throughout Scripture, God uses dreams to get people's attention. A shift takes place in Jacob's focus because of this particular dream.

Jacob begins to move from his self-selected life path to a God-directed life purpose. We all need to make that shift.

Adults are always asking children, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” At first, we tend to respond with childish answers. When I was a little kid, Roy Rogers was popular, so I wanted to be a cowboy. Then the astronauts rocketed into space, and I wanted to be an astronaut. Eventually, as high school graduation approached, I started thinking about it more carefully: What do I want to do? What do I want to be? There were two choices for many males of my generation: go to college or go to Vietnam. I thought at the time that college would be a better choice.

One of my high school friends was a guy named John. He was two years older than I was and was already attending the University of Cincinnati as a computer science major. I didn’t know what computer science was, but I had to apply for something, so I put computer science down. I received a rejection letter from the University of Cincinnati indicating that I didn’t have the high school math requirements to get into computer science. The letter named two university programs for which I would be eligible. I don’t remember the second one, but the first one was retail management. I had never thought about retail management, but I declared it as my major simply because the program would accept me. How many times do we find ourselves doing things because the opportunity is there and we just kind of fall into it? If that has happened to you, do you ever find yourself asking the question, “Isn’t there something more?” None of us wants to miss the “more.”

We all go through times of restlessness or difficulty in our lives. Many times that restlessness comes from boredom. People have routines, and routines create ruts. You may notice this trend each Sunday evening on Facebook, where in their statuses people bemoan

the return to work and ask how the weekend passed by so quickly. Instead of living in the present and celebrating its gifts, we try to rush through life and get to the next weekend, the next place, the next promotion, or the next spouse. We call Wednesday “hump day” as we start a downhill slide into the longed-for weekend, which is greeted with the cry, “TGIF!”

I am writing this chapter just days after Carolyn and I celebrated our forty-first Christmas as a married couple. Talk about routine! Each year we decorate our house the identical way, placing decorations and memorabilia in the exact same spots. For instance, we have an antique chest of drawers in our entryway where we put our nativity set. As I walked by recently, I picked up a piece of the nativity, looked at it, and set it back down. Later that day I noticed that Carolyn had moved it back three inches because she realized it wasn’t where we always put it. We fall into these routines, and routines create ruts.

As a pastor, I see that in worship most of our attendees sit in the same chairs each week. If I run into one of them during my workout at the YMCA, I may not even know the person’s name but I will say, “I missed you in worship this week.” Since Ginghamburg is a large church, the person often asks how I knew. It’s because I saw the open chair. It’s funny to watch how people react on Sunday morning when they find others sitting in “their” seats. We get comfortable and resist change because routines have carved these deep ruts in our lives. That’s when God may use dreams to create a restless sleep that will finally get our attention.

## **Learning from Dreams**

So Jacob had this crazy dream with staircases and angels, but it did have a point. Because of the dream, Jacob realized, in that very

ordinary place, that God was a powerful presence to which Jacob had previously been oblivious. Jacob then *knew* that God was with him.

Maybe your “crazy” dreams also have a point. I believe our dreams may be the narrowest crossing between heaven and earth, between spiritual and physical, between supernatural and natural. Celtic Christians call these crossings “thin places.” A thin place is where you can almost see to the other side; it’s where the barrier between natural and supernatural is broken down. The mystics talk about the third eye, with which we see into another dimension and which Hindu women represent by wearing a dot on their foreheads. In Genesis 28, Jacob refers to the entrance to heaven. In early Christian and Jewish traditions, people didn’t believe that heaven and earth were far away but existed right next to each other. Dreams provide a bridge between our conscious and subconscious. In the busyness and noise of our daily routines and concerns, our subconscious can only come into play when we are asleep. Through it, we can begin to see to the other side.

Have you ever dreamed about a loved one who has died? I have. My dad died two years ago, but in my dreams about family get-togethers he still shows up. He enters my home with the rest of the family, but he doesn’t come right up to me. He sits off to one side. In a recent dream, Dad was sitting away from me in church, eating with a group of people, and he looked at me as I entered the room to teach. This past week, I dreamed that my mom and dad entered my home together. As my mom walked closer, my dad went into another room. But he was still in my house. He exists for me right now, because I can see him in my subconscious. I even dream about my dog, Luka. I know he has died, but in this dream I can pet him. I can feel the knot on his nose and the bump on his head. That is why



I believe Luka will be with me in heaven, the same way John Wesley, the founder of the Wesleyan movement, believed his horse would be in heaven.

When we are awake, we are limited by what we can and cannot do in the physical world. But when our subconscious sees to the other side, those limits disappear. For instance, have you ever been able to fly in your dreams? British author and scholar C. S. Lewis believed that in the next realm we would be able to fly. That is why, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy are able to fly when they pass into the world of Narnia.<sup>2</sup> If I dream of evil monsters, in my dream I am able to speak the name of Jesus and see the power I have in Christ to banish them. I firmly believe God can speak to us in our dreams. This is why each morning I take time to journal about my dreams and God's message to me as part of my devotional time. As soon as I wake up I begin to forget, and I don't want to lose what God has shared.

Look at Job 33:14: "God speaks in one way, in two ways, but no one perceives it." We often miss God's voice the first time around because of noise, concerns, and routines. But at night God can get our full attention. We go on to read in Job 33:15-18:

In the dream, a vision of the night,  
when deep sleep falls upon humans,  
during their slumber on a bed,  
then he opens people's ears,  
scares them with warnings,  
to turn them from a deed  
and to smother human pride.  
He keeps one from the pit,  
a life from perishing by the sword.

In the subconscious, dark spirits lurk that we aren't always aware of in our waking life. In my dreams, sometimes I am warned of temptations that could harm or destroy me, the people I love, and those who look to me for leadership. Here's an example from a dream I had last summer, which I immediately journaled about the next morning.

In my dream I am driving through a low-income neighborhood in the West College Hill district of Cincinnati, an economically challenged area where early in my ministry I worked as a pastor with many young people. In fact, when I was nineteen, it was two churches in this community, one Baptist and one A.M.E., which first let me preach. As I drive down the street in my dream, a toddler girl is sitting and playing in the middle of the road. I swerve left and then right to miss her. With heart racing, I look in my rearview mirror. I didn't hit her, but she is still sitting there.

Some dreams are so real, so vivid. When I woke up, my heart was pounding, and my body was covered in a cold sweat. Here is what I believe God was saying to me through that dream.

At the time, I had been worrying about the work of Ginghamburg Church in Darfur, Sudan. We had served in Darfur since 2005, investing over \$6 million dollars in sustainable humanitarian projects including agriculture, safe water, and child development and protection. I had been fretting over the upcoming Christmas Miracle Offering to fund the project for the next year. It would be our ninth time to call the Ginghamburg family to sacrificial giving at Christmas, and I was concerned about the "compassion fatigue" that might have settled in. In the early days, as our hearts were touched by the Darfuris' plight and the first genocide of the twenty-first century, it was easier to feel good about sacrifice and making a significant difference in people's lives. But sometimes we can get tired, just worn out, with compassion exhausted. I feared our people

had reached that point. I wondered if we should be doing something else.

What God said to me so vividly in that dream was, “You might not have hit that little girl in the street, but it’s not enough just to pass her by. You have got to go back and get that kid out of the street so no one else hits her.” In essence, the Lord said to me, “Mike, this ten years of feeling good about working in one place is not what it means to be a follower of Jesus; you need to keep taking care of the children, whether they are sitting in the street in Dayton, Ohio, or struggling to survive in Darfur, Sudan.” God reminded me I had signed up for life! God used that dream to get my attention.

## **Waking Visions**

Of course, God also can speak to us through visions when we are awake. Let’s take a look at Acts 9:10-12:

In Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, “Ananias!” He answered, “Yes, Lord.” The Lord instructed him, “Go to Judas’ house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias enter and put his hands on him to restore his sight.”

It’s interesting how specific this vision is. Have you ever been sitting in your house watching TV or totally engrossed in what you were doing, only to have a person’s name pop into your head? There’s a chance that such thoughts may come from God. If the thought is good or appropriate, then I believe it’s from God. I know that whenever it happens to me, no matter how involved I am in what I am doing, I need to get up and call that person or take the action that God

has brought to mind. These types of experiences are visions. It's the Holy Spirit moving, and there is nothing more important for me to do at that moment than respond. God speaks through dreams when we are asleep, and God speaks through visions when we are awake.

As I write this book, Ginghamburg Church is celebrating its 150th anniversary. In 1863, a circuit rider named B. W. Day preached in Vandalia, just south of our current location, at a two-week revival meeting. A circuit rider was a preacher who rode around the country preaching and would stay at each place for a few weeks. Then the believers, if they were so moved, would start a faith community. When B. W. finished the revival in Vandalia, he had a vision to visit a tiny burg of a place called Ginghamburg and preach a revival. But it didn't really make sense. Vandalia was a thriving little town, but Ginghamburg was only twenty-two houses with a post office and a community center. The town didn't even have a church. But B. W. was convinced God had spoken and declared that a movement would be birthed out of Ginghamburg that would influence the world. B. W. was obedient to the vision. He came to Ginghamburg and preached his heart out for two weeks, resulting in eighteen conversions. Now, that isn't much to show for preaching your heart out. But ten of those eighteen new believers decided to create this faith community called Ginghamburg Church, believing B. W. Day's vision that Ginghamburg would grow into a movement that would influence the world. And, thanks to generations of faithful Christians who followed, it did.

As B. W. Day knew, God speaks to us in visions while we are awake. For that to happen, of course, we must make space in our lives to be present to God's presence. We must make time for what the ancients called contemplation. God is here, but I have to make myself aware; I must become intimate with the Third Person of the Trinity, the

Holy Spirit. We study about God the Father: God is love. We study about God the Son: Jesus is the redeemer who revealed the Father to us. We know the least about the Holy Spirit, and yet it is in this form that God communicates our purpose to each of us. Many of us complain that we never hear a word from God, much less receive a vision, but we also don't do anything about developing the relationship. We will never hear or sense the work of the Spirit if we don't invest time each day in praying, examining God's word, and listening for God's voice.

Jesus said in John 14:16-19a, "I will ask the Father, and he will send another Companion, who will be with you forever. This Companion is the Spirit of Truth. . . . I won't leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me." That is what the Holy Spirit allows us to do while we're awake: to see the Spirit in the thin places, serving as the third eye into that which is otherwise unseen. The Spirit, Jesus taught, will lead us into all truth, guiding us in what is to come.

## **A Life Mission Statement**

Before you move on to the next chapter, take some time in prayer and discernment to work through the questions that follow. Your responses to these and other questions at the end of Chapters 1-5 will serve as the foundation for your life mission statement. Then, at the end of Chapter 6, you will build your life mission statement.

Let me help to get you started on the questions below. I've asked you to identify three people you admire and then answer questions about them. As an example, I will name one of the three people I listed: Bono, lead singer for the rock group U2.

Bono's BHAG is not his day job, which is rock music. He loves his music, I'm sure, and it has blessed his family. However, his passion is eliminating extreme poverty, especially in Africa. He has focused on many of the same needs in the greater African continent that Ginghamburg Church has dealt with in Darfur.

Bono spoke at my son's college graduation from the University of Pennsylvania, and he was the best graduation speaker I've ever heard. He came walking out in his robe with his boots on and hair flowing, and all those Ivy League grads rose to their feet to cheer him. Bono said, "But no, I never went to college; I've slept in some strange places, but the library wasn't one of them." Then he shared his BHAG about eliminating extreme poverty in Africa. To paraphrase the end of his speech he basically was challenging them, "That's what I'm doing with my life; what are you Ivy League graduates going to do with yours?"<sup>3</sup>

The quality I admire in Bono is that he demonstrates life is not about success but about service. Life is not about chasing the money; it's about chasing the mission. And when you chase the mission, God will go with you.

My goal in the pages ahead is to awaken the God-dream in you and unlock the gift of what it means to live that dream—a dream that honors God, blesses others, and brings you joy. Now, let's get to work on those questions.

# Building Your Life Mission Statement

## Part 1

Identify three people you admire, and ask the following questions about them:

- What are the greatest qualities that you think these people exemplify?
- What steps have these people taken to nurture these qualities?
- Why are these qualities important to you? How would your life be different if you lived more effectively into these qualities?