



◦ TITLE

Different, Harder, Longer, Better

◦ SUBTITLE

**Waiting well for your dreams
to come to pass**

◉ **EBOOK 3**

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Different, Harder, Longer, Better
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This is the account of Jacob's family line.

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.¹

Start

Joseph is a dreamer.

God's people have *always* been dreamers.

As long as God has been in relationship with people, he's been giving them dreams, dripping them a seed form of their destiny in his unfolding story.

Now, when I say "dreams," I don't just mean literal dreams while you are asleep. That, yes, but I also mean dreams in the broader, metaphoric sense.

A vision in your heart and mind of your desired future ...

Or prophetic word over the role you are to play in your family ...

Or a gut sense something is going to happen in the coming season ...

Or a vague feeling of your destiny in God's good world ...

Maybe your dream is for your career, or job, or business, or start up ...

Maybe it's for your church or community or family ...

Maybe it's a call to justice and peace ... or to shift the needle on the wider culture ...

Maybe it's about what you will do ...

Or who you will do it with ...

Or where you will live ...

Or when it will all happen ...

Coming off the global disruption of COVID-19, we're all gingerly starting to dream again. What does life look like in a post-COVID world?

But here's my assumption: Deep in your heart is a dream.

It may be burning on the forefront of your consciousness every morning upon waking ...

Or it may be buried under layers of failure and frustration and doubt and confusion, accumulated over the years like an archeological tell, so high you've forgotten what's at the bottom. All that's left is a vague nudge from deep in your heart ...

But here's my next assumption: What if at least *part* of it is from God?

Dreams play a key role in our life. They function like a map for the road of life. Or at least, a compass heading. Without dreams, we just wander in circles. Dreams are central to how God leads and guides us into our identity and calling, into becoming who God made us to be and doing what God made us to do.

Helen Keller, the first person without sight or hearing to earn a Bachelor's degree, was once asked a very insensitive question: What's worse than being blind? She answered, "The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision."

We need a vision of our future destiny in God's story. I don't mean destiny in the prosperity gospel sense of health and wealth, but in the biblical sense – our calling from God. The part we play. The gift we offer. The story we live.

One of the primary ways we determine our destiny is through the medium of our desire – through dreams that God has put into our heart. The

Christian tradition has an incredibly sophisticated view of desire: the heart is a mixed bag of complex and contradictory desires, like a maze or labyrinth to navigate. But below the chaos of our ever-shifting feelings is often a deep undercurrent of desire – a subterranean river of the soul, moving us toward an outlet. It's often the Spirit of God desiring through our desire. Dreaming through our dreams, guiding us into our destiny.

(And yes, I believe you have a destiny. I don't think our future is scripted in precise detail, any more than I believe we are automatons following a kind of spiritual programming. But I do believe "the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."²)

But dreams are a tricky thing to live with since there is always a gap between the dream and the reality.

A gap of time – a dream may come in a momentary flash of inspiration, during prayer or simply while riding the bus to work, but it may not come to pass for months, or years, or even decades ...

A gap of circumstances – the cold, hard reality of our life is nothing like the dream in our heart, and the chasm is wide ...

A gap of capacity or character – should the dream miraculously come to pass in a moment, we're nowhere close to ready to steward it with poise and humility and wisdom ...

And living in the gap is *hard*. In the long season of waiting, we tend to run the full emotional gamut – from hope and anticipation and faith and patience to confusion and doubt and impatience and, at times, despair.

From a young age, we are habituated by our culture (and we're co-conspirators here, not victims) to expect *fast* in every area of life – from fast food to fast Wi-Fi ("Give it a minute; it's going to space!") to literal fast lanes, we let

technology delude us into thinking that *all* of life can be hacked, bypassed, or expedited. We want a Fast Pass for the soul, but it doesn't exist.

The result? An entire generation who, no matter your personality type, is struggling to live in the confusing in between. Because there's no killer app for the soul; souls are grown the ancient way, like trees, slowly, over decades, on a timescale entirely different to that of human civilization, by sinking roots deep and waiting patiently.

Yeah, that doesn't sound like our jam ...

Enter Joseph.

Joseph's story – ancient as it may be – is a scriptural paradigm for how to live in the gap between the dream and the reality. Between the conception of a dream in our heart and its birth in our lives.

But for Joseph (and for you and me), the journey from dream to reality was anything but a straight line. It was long and hard. It was three steps forward, two steps back ...

And only at the end does it all make sense. Meaning only comes when we look backward; forward is just guesswork.

So, here's the plan: Let's walk through Joseph's story over the next few pages, then we'll take a breath and draw out a few lessons for our own dreams ...

The Story

We started with Joseph's teenage dream, a vision of him leading his family. Even the "sun and moon" – his father and mother – bowing down

to him. He's either arrogant or naïve enough (I suspect both) to mouth the grandiose vision to his brothers, which is *not* the best way to win over your older brothers.

And what happens? They see him coming in the distance, and say,

Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."³

They ambush the "dreamer" (note the moniker), strip off his father's robe (the one visible sign of his dream ever coming to be), and throw him in an underground cistern, planning to murder him within hours. His brother Judah is able to talk them into an alternative of selling Joseph to slave traders and making some money off his demise.

This is literally the *exact* opposite of Joseph's dream. He goes down to Egypt not as a ruler, but as a *slave*.

As the story unfolds, it's clear that God's hand is on Joseph's life; there's a destiny upon him. He prospers under his Egyptian master, Potiphar, who makes him ruler over his whole house, *until* tragedy strikes again. The master's wife accuses him of impropriety, and he's thrown in prison on trumped up charges.

Again, he prospers; he's such a model prisoner that he becomes the "ruler" of the prison. As he's administrating the prison, two new inmates arrive from the king's court – the royal cupbearer and the baker. *They* have dreams and awake distraught because there is "no one to interpret them." So Joseph, who is becoming more gracious with age, says,

"Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams."⁴

They tell. And Joseph is able to interpret those dreams – accurately! The cupbearer is set free from prison within days, and the baker is put to death, exactly as Joseph said it would be.

Think about the irony here: Joseph can interpret other people’s dreams accurately, but *his own* dreams have not come to pass.

Can you imagine how that would make you feel? The cupbearer has a dream, and *three days later* it comes into being. Joseph has a dream, *years* go by, and he’s still rotting in a dungeon with zero future.

Next line:

When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream ...⁵

Okay, now everyone is dreaming, even Pharaoh. Read the *Genesis* account for the entire story, but his dream is a kaleidoscope of odd images about sleek cows eating fat cows, and he wakes up utterly confused. His advisors are just as stumped, but it suddenly hits the cupbearer that he knows a guy ...

So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh.

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 he desires.”⁶

The story rolls on and Joseph, no surprise, can interpret Pharaoh’s dream

down to the letter. The seven fat cows are seven years of plenty; the seven gaunt cows, seven years of famine. (Read the full story to know more.)

But once again, Joseph's *own dream* is defunct.

Then things finally start to change:

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him, "Make way!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.⁷

In a surprising twist, the slave is turned into a ruler, overnight. Sometimes life is like that, sudden. Most of the time, change is gradual and uneven and slow; but every once in a while, when God is involved, you wait and you wait *and you wait* and then, in a moment, everything changes. A "suddenly" kind of God-ordained moment when the phone rings; you get the job offer; you meet a person and fall in love; your prayer of years is answered. Years of wondering, *Where is God?* turn into a miracle followed by weeping for joy.

But *still*, Joseph hasn't seen his brothers in over a decade. He's become a ruler, yes, but not in his family. The dream is starting to come true, but not in full. But like all good stories, this one is long and complex. The famine that Joseph predicted comes to pass, and Joseph's family is nearing

starvation. The brothers travel down to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph. Joseph is all grown up and living under a new Egyptian name, Zaphenath-Paneah. So, when they arrive, they don't even recognize him, but ...

... they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.⁸

Next, the line we've been waiting for ...

Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. *Then he remembered his dreams ...*⁹

In the end, Joseph can't hold back ...

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me."

When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance."¹⁰

Joseph can see how all his pain, all the suffering, all the years of waiting, was full of meaning and purpose – God used it to “save your lives by a great deliverance.” He brought life and salvation out of grief, loss, betrayal, and heart-rending pain.

Now *that*, my friends, is a heck of a story.

And there's a lot we can learn from Joseph's story about how to live in the gap between the dream and the reality.

Let's zero in on four things. When the dream comes to pass it's different, harder, longer, better.

A short word on each ...

Different

Joseph sees his brothers bowing down to him.

He does *not* see slavery in Egypt.

He does *not* see prison.

He does *not* see the years of waiting.

He sees a little, but is blind to a lot.

Dreams are often like that. The reality is to the dream what the tree is to the seed: all the raw materials are in that seed, but it's just a fraction of the whole. When we get that dream from God, we might get 10 percent of the full picture. Or even 50 percent. But there are whole chunks missing.

Or, we see the future, but it's muddy and ambiguous, not clear. We have a vague sense, but no clarity about how it will all take shape. As the Apostle Paul put it, "Now we know *in part*."¹¹ Not in full. The New Testament theologian N.T. Wright has that great line: "All prophecy about the future is signposts pointing into the fog."¹²

That's because *the point of a dream isn't to tell you what's going to happen in the future; it's to tell you how to live in the present.*

In fact, God seems to be against his people knowing the future. There's an ancient sin we read about throughout the Old Testament called divination,

where people would divine the future through a witch or a medium or spiritualist.

Divination is still around because there is a human craving in all of us to know the future. It just looks different in our culture, more secular, less spiritual. It's all the pundits on the news, the op-eds predicting what will happen in geo-politics, the "futurists" on Twitter claiming they have insider information about how history is going to play out, when in reality *nobody knows*.

We want to know the future, because knowledge is power. And if we can know the future, then we can have control – or at least *feel* in control – of the future. Then we don't have to trust God.

But God doesn't want us to have control; he wants us to have faith.

Which is my best take on why God will rarely, if ever, tell you exactly what is going to happen. Instead, he will tell you just enough about tomorrow to show you how to live *today*. Show you what to focus on. How to gear up and prepare. What choice to make in real time. The kind of person you need to become for whenever it is that your dream comes to pass.

But because of that pattern in God's dealing with us, when the dream *does* come to pass, it's often a little different, or a *lot* different, than we were expecting.

Here's a lesson I've had to learn the hard way: *expect* the reality to look and feel different than the dream.

So, first, different.

Next ...

Harder

As I said, Joseph sees a picture of his family bowing down to him. But he does not see the slave train. Or Potiphar's wife accusing him of sexual assault. Or years spent languishing in the dungeon. Or having his ethnic identity erased by an imperial culture. Or never getting to say goodbye to his mother before her death.

He sees all of the good, but none of the bad. In his dream, there are literally "stars in his eyes."

Maybe that's because God knew Joseph wasn't ready to hear about the pain and suffering that were coming down the pike. He didn't have the maturity, and it would have crushed him.

Or maybe God *did* give Joseph a vision of impending trauma, but he just would not hear it. He found a way to filter it out or explain it away.

I do this all the time. Do you?

When we get a dream, we often romanticize it. Let it play in our imagination to a movie soundtrack and golden afternoon light. The future is always this warm, fuzzy haze of bliss. It's always *better* than right here, right now.

But then it comes to pass, and it's *not* necessarily better at all. Or it is, but our life is still full of suffering that we need to make peace with.

Marriage is a great example of this. When you're single, it's easy to think, *When I get married, then all my dreams will come true*. And we get there, and, well, in the words of Paul, "Those who marry will face many troubles in this life."¹³

True dat.

I'm confident this is one of the driving reasons behind the astronomical divorce rate in our culture. People go into marriage with stars in their eyes. They don't fall in love with a person, they fall in love with the *idea* of that person – a romanticized, idealized interpretation of that person that does violence to the reality of their partner's actual soul, with all its light and shadow. *No* one, no matter how beautiful or intelligent or charming or wonderful, can possibly live up to an image. None of us can compete with a fantasy.

Marriage is a very good thing, but it's not bliss. And it's often much harder than people imagine.

We think life is a straight, linear arrow to success. But it's more like the plot of a literary novel, up and down, ambiguous, rich and meaningful, full of joy and sorrow at the same time.

As the writer Pema Chodron put it: “We think that the point is to pass the test or overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.”¹⁴

But so often, we, like Joseph, are blind to this. We fall prey to the illusions of advertising and our own internal coping mechanisms; we imagine a suffering-free life, rather than a meaningful one, and our dreams are often experienced as rude awakenings.

Peace comes from making room for the reality of life as it actually is – with its joys and its sorrows.

Different,
harder ...

Longer

By my count, there are eight chapters and upwards of over *two decades* between Joseph's dream and the reality.

Joseph is 17 when he dreams, and 30 when he becomes ruler of Egypt. But *nine* more years go by (seven years of plenty, and two years of famine) before his dream comes to pass.

That adds up to a twenty-two year wait.

That's a *long* time.

As is often said, there's a time gap between the conception of a dream, and its birth. God will often conceive something in your heart *long* before it's born into the world. The Spirit who impregnated Mary will often drip into our mind, imagination, and desire the seed of our future destiny. But like any pregnancy, there's a long period of gestation and waiting, followed by the pain and suffering of labor, *followed* by new life that drowns out the former sorrows in overwhelming joy.

When I receive a dream from God, I tend to think, *OK, let's go do this thing.*

Now.

But often it's months, or years, or even decades ahead of God's time.

In my experience, the larger the dream, the longer the waiting period, and the smaller the dream, the shorter the wait.

Small dream, *short wait*.

Large dream, *long wait*.

Either way, the waiting period is usually much longer than we expect.

Did you see that one line at the beginning of chapter 41?

When two full years had passed ... ¹⁵

It's just a quick, throwaway line. Easy to skip over. But two years is nothing to laugh at.

Can you imagine how Joseph would have felt during that time? Just sitting in prison hearing crickets. No word from God, all alone, no hope of release, just grinding it out, day after day, waiting.

Waiting is hard.

I'm personally *terrible* at it. My personality is a long-range planner, strategic thinker. Living in the future is easy for me. Living in the here and now is very, very hard. I wrote a book on the ruthless elimination of hurry *because I have a serious problem with hurry*. It was my sincere effort to write myself into a better life. But writing (or reading) a book does not make it so; waiting is still very hard for me.

But.

If your dream is from God – and not all our dreams are – then there is a time on the horizon when it will come to pass.

It just will.

There's a phrase all through the library of Scripture that I love: "the appointed time."

There is an “appointed time” for your dream to turn to reality. When prophecy and providence come together into God’s call on your life.

You can only be pregnant for so long.

And when the dream is *finally* here, it’s often different,

harder,

longer...

Better

For all Joseph’s grandiosity and larger-than-life ego, when it actually comes to pass, it’s even grander than he imagined. He’s not just a ruler in his family, but over the largest, most powerful nation on earth.

The reality was even better than the dream

But.

Not necessarily “better” by human metrics. Joseph’s dream – or at least his interpretation of his dream – was all about his own glory. His pride and ego and brash immaturity are just dripping off the page. (You don’t need a PhD in psychology to discern that if you’re the youngest of twelve brothers and God tells you that you’re going to one day rule over your entire family, maybe keep that to yourself.)

Joseph did get glory, eventually. His brothers did bow down. But it came after years of humiliation, pain, and loss.

And in the end, the dream wasn’t about Joseph at all. It was about saving the family of Israel, whom the Creator God had chosen to save the entire

world. It was about the much larger, global, historic story that *God* was weaving across nations and continents and generations, dwarfing any one human life.

But before God could bring the dream to pass, he had to strip it of all Joseph's ego and idolatry. This seems to be God's M.O. He takes our dreams that are all about our own glory, and he makes us wait – and sometimes, he even lets us suffer.

But something beautiful happens in that waiting period, if we let it. The dream is stripped of all its ego and idolatry down to the raw essence that's from God. And *we're* stripped down too. We grow and mature into the kind of people who can steward the fulfillment of the dream with wisdom, humility, and Christlike character.

When people have dreams come to pass too early, it's rarely a good thing because they don't have the character yet to steward it. Think of the story of an actor or pop star or celebrity who becomes famous young but just can't handle the stress, the public scrutiny, the paparazzi. They run into problems.

I can think of some pastor friends who became a little famous, a little too soon, and it broke their ministry. As my mentor put it to me, "If the enemy can't underpromote you, he'll overpromote you faster than your rhythms of grace can sustain."¹⁶

And often, if we get our dream too young, we can't even enjoy it. Because it's an idol. We *need* it to be happy. We need the success to keep rolling. We need our life to keep trending up and to the right. Our identity and well-being are wrapped up in something as mercurial as the weather.

When I say, the dream is an idol, I mean, the dream becomes our god.

Rather than a gift *from* God. We want the dream more than we want the God who gave it. We want to arrive at some envisioned destination more than we want to travel with the “Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”¹⁷

Worse: we think that when we “arrive,” the dream will satisfy us and make us content. But *no* dream can do that, only God can.

So, there’s a pattern. Often God will let the dream die in order to free our heart from its idolatry and bring us to a place where we’re content with God himself. And *then*, sometimes, he will give it back. After all, in the economy of the kingdom, dead things regularly come back to life.

But now we’re ready for the fulfillment. It took a while, but we’re ready to steward the fulfillment with wisdom and humility and generosity – because we realize, it’s not even about us.

But when it comes back to life, it’s not the same. It’s better. But not better by our human metrics. Better by God’s metrics.

And we find it was more than worth the wait.

Different,

harder,

longer,

better.

Sounds like a sportswear advertisement, but I would argue it’s a biblical theology of dreams that we could lay over almost any biopic in the library of Scripture – Moses and his dream to lead Israel out of slavery; David and his dream to build a Temple in Jerusalem; Paul and his dream to preach the gospel in Rome.

God's people have always been dreamers.

What about you?

Where does this intersect in your own story?

Do you need to start dreaming? To ask God for grace and courage to open your heart and mind to the Spirit's possibilities over your future? To discover your destiny?

Or do you need dig under the layers of cynicism and compromise and unearth a dream God put in your heart years ago? Has it been buried under the dust of time? Dig it out and let it grow under the sun and rain of God's loving hand.

With all dreams, we have to discern, in prayer and in community, if the dream is from God, and, if so, what steps he's calling us to take in its direction.

But whatever your dream, the odds are high there's *something* of God in it. Some spark of truth we need to let burn. Some undercurrent of the Spirit running through the desire of your heart.

Do you have a dream?

Are you stuck in the limbo of the confusing in between?

Do whatever you can, all that's in *your* hands, but then ...

Let me invite you to trust God. To let go of outcomes. It sounds cliché, but to trust God is to release the illusion of control.

Of course: trust is *active*, not passive; it's something we do. We don't just sit around and "trust" God to lay out the red carpet for our dream. We step

out in faith toward whatever God is stirring in our heart. As my friend Bryan Loritts put it, “Faith is how you actualize your destiny.”

We risk failure or rejection, we lay it all on the line, we labor and sweat and bleed. We actively partner with God to see the dream he conceived in our heart come to birth. Like a mother, we let God grow his dream in the womb of our life.

But at the same time, *we hold the dream with an open fist*. Relaxed, not grasping.

Every day a new surrender.

God, here's my dream ...

Here's my trust ...

Whatever happens, your will be done. Whatever leads to your deepening life in me, that's my deepest desire.

Because as much as I want this dream to come to pass, it's not my God.

You are ...

Dear reader,

In this season of chaos and much fear, coming on the heels of a global pandemic when so many of our dreams were dashed and our bright futures ravished by a hurricane of suffering and pain ...

Dream.

And dream well.

Open up your mind and imagination to the Spirit's desiring through your desire; let the river flow; give up control; follow the current...

And when it's different – stop grasping and let it be ...

When it's harder – don't give up, persevere to the end. Find a little of what the psychologist Angela Duckworth calls “grit” and tap into that ...

When it's longer – “imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised ...”¹⁸

And when it's better – weep for joy ...

Endnotes

- 1.** Genesis 37:19-20.
- 2.** Psalm 139:16.
- 3.** Genesis 37:19-20.
- 4.** Genesis 40:8.
- 5.** Genesis 41:1.
- 6.** Genesis 41:14-16.
- 7.** Genesis 41:39-43.
- 8.** Genesis 42:6.
- 9.** Genesis 42:8-9.
- 10.** Genesis 45:4-7.
- 11.** 1 Corinthians 13:12. I took a little liberty and changed his “I know” to “we know.”
- 12.** N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008)*.
- 13.** 1 Corinthians 7:28.
- 14.** Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart (Boston: Shambhala, 1997)*.
- 15.** Genesis 41:1.
- 16.** Thank you, Chris Weinand.
- 17.** 1 Peter 2:25.
- 18.** Hebrews 6:12.

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