

God's Great Dream

Do dogs dream? I've watched our family dog sound asleep on the family room floor. Even though she's in a stationary position she seems to be animated. Her body tenses; her legs run. Growls come from her throat. And it seems to me that she's probably dreaming of chasing a rabbit across a wide-open field, getting closer and closer, outrunning the bunny and closing in for the capture.

Philosophers actually have a name for my imagination. It is called anthropomorphism. It is the combination of two Greek words for human and form. It is putting the dog's thinking into human forms.

We do the same thing when we imagine about God. With the dog we're imagining down. With God we are imagining up. We try to understand who God is and how God thinks in human terms that we can understand. The Bible is loaded with anthropomorphisms. They are descriptions that fit our vocabulary. The Old Testament refers to God as having wings and feathers. Obviously, that does not mean that God looks like a bird. It means that he can soar high above us, that he can protect us like we are young chicks under the wings of the hen. It is analogies like that that help us to understand who God is.

The Bible explains that God's ways are not our ways, that God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Except with God, we have help because the Bible is a book that was written to help us understand God's thoughts and to comprehend God's dreams. The Bible is God's initiative to help us understand about him. And it begins with a dream that one day tragically died.

The beginning of the dream is summarized in the last paragraph of the first chapter of the Bible. Genesis 1:27-31 says:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Then God said, "I give you every seed-

bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

God's dream was spectacular. It is the dream of every artist stepping up to a blank canvas and imagining the completed masterpiece before the first stroke of the brush touches the canvas. It is the dream of every architect who can imagine the whole building finished and complete even before the first spade full of dirt has been turned over. It is the dream of every couple beginning a family. It is the dream of creating something very good and long-lasting.

God's dream was to design and create human friends who would be as much like God as humans could possibly be. We would be in the image of God. We would have intellect as God has intellect. We would have diversity of emotions as God has an array of feelings. And we would have wills of our own to exercise choice as God has choices that he makes. We would be the friends of God and God would be our friend. He would love his creatures

and we would love him. It is no wonder that he chose to be called "Father" for that is exactly what every new mother and father wants.

Stand outside the church nursery and interview parents with new babies. Ask them about their dreams for their children.

They will all say similar things. They want their children to be like their parents, but they also want them to be independent individuals on their own. They want to give the best they have to provide lifelong happiness for their children. They want their children to have fulfilling and productive lives. They don't want to smother their children with control so that they never leave the nest, but they want

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to be close friends and share mutual love long after the babies have become adults.

That was God's dream when he gave life to his children, Adam and Eve, and provided a lovely home for them in a place called Eden. God's human children were given a paradise to enjoy. They had the best of everything on the land, in the water and in the air. Food was plentiful. It wasn't just that they were driven by their curiosity, although God made them to be curious, but God provided all of the stimuli for intellectual growth. He gave to them power and authority over this magnificent creation that he had designed. And best of all, God was their very best friend. He talked to them often. Their communication was frequent and sweet.

Sometimes I think that we today are so far removed from paradise that it is really impossible for us to imagine what paradise would be like. We wonder what life today could have been or would have been had that paradise continued. The Bible never actually says because the Bible is a book that deals with realities more than about what might have been.

I imagine that paradise would have expanded to include us all. Our world would be free from violence, sickness and death. The environment would be as pristine and perfect as the day God created the earth. Our intellectual growth would far surpass anything that modern education has ever provided. Happiness would be greater than anything we could possibly imagine. We would all be everything we were meant to be and God would still be able to say that everything is "very good". God's dream would have come true.

But God's dream died. Paradise was lost. That is something we can understand because it has happened to us all. There is not a single one of us who has not been disappointed in some dream that we have had that never came true or that died too soon. For some, it is the dream of a career that never developed. For many, it is the shattered dream of a broken relationship. We thought that person would be our very best friend for the rest of life. We thought we would be lovers until the day we died, but it didn't happen. Perhaps it was a marriage that began with love and turned to hate. Or it was investments that were supposed to make us rich but left us poor, surgery that was supposed to cure the pain and instead left us disabled, pregnancies that were supposed to bring children but ended in miscarriages or lovable little babies who grew up to totally break their parents' hearts. Yes, we understand a bit about

dreams that die or are broken.

God's dream died when Adam and Eve turned it into a nightmare. It is described in a single line in the New Testament in Romans 5:12 where it says, "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned."

Sin was the virus from hell. It was like the epidemics that are described in novels and movies. It is like the fear that is struck from medical journals and press releases about the possibility of new stains of contagious diseases that are beyond the cure of modern medicine. We realize that ancient plagues could once more sweep the globe. Physical contact or even a sneeze or a breath will pass the virus from person to person. Husbands infect wives and mothers pass the illness along to their children.

God's dream shattered with a virus of the soul called sin.

Sometimes I hear people speak angry words against God because life is not the way they hoped and dreamed it would be. They speak as if God were somehow cruelly satisfied with human misery and evil. That is not the way it is at all. No one is more disappointed than God. Our very best dreams were his dreams. Our highest hopes were his hopes.

We humans have been dreaming of rebuilding paradise ever since the Garden of Eden. In fact, Wooddale Church is in a town called Eden, out on the prairie, where we dream of making lives ideal, of building homes and having families and careers in a new Eden all over again. But we know from experience that it is not within our power to recreate that which was lost.

The good news is that God has dreamed again. It is not a dream of wiping the slate clean and starting all over again. It is a dream of people redeemed. It is God's dream of getting back the sinners he has lost.

Most of the Bible is about God's new dream, but it is summed up in just one line of the New Testament in II Peter 3:9: "(God) is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." It is the repeated good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ in John 3:17 where it says, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

And then in John 10:10 where Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

The central theme of the Bible is God's dream

of getting back all that he lost. God's dream is to regain the close relationship with us humans with an antidote to the virus of sin. That antidote was made from the only person immune to sin—Jesus. Through his blood, humans can be cured and live forever instead of dying forever. The gospel is the good news that Jesus stepped up to the cross and gave his lifeblood for us to be cured and saved from sin.

The rest of God's dream is that we will live forever in the kind of right relationship that God intended for us in the original dream. God's desire is for us to renounce sin, to be infused by faith with the power of the blood of Jesus Christ and to begin living the right way so that we can spend forever with him in heaven in a paradise that is regained.

There are two parts to making God's new dream come true, at least from our side. Number One is that we are recipients and Number Two is that we are participants. As recipients we say "yes" to Jesus Christ and become Christians. As participants we share in making God's dream come true by helping others become Christians.

Wooddale Church is about both. We seek to help everyone receive Jesus Christ and personally experience God's dreams. We seek to participate with God and each other in helping unbelievers become Christians.

One of the evidences of being a Christian is sharing God's dream. For a person to say, "I believe in God; I love God; I am a Christian" but not share God's dream for others to become Christians is terribly inconsistent. In the People's Republic of China there are about 28,000 new Christians per day. More people are becoming Christians in China than any other place in the world. And probably more people are becoming Christians there every day than at any other time in history. The church there has had to define very clearly who was a Christian and who was not. So they came up with seven essential elements to identify who was really is a Christian. One of those seven elements is that a person must evangelize. So they would say that if someone does not actively participate in the fulfillment of God's dream to bring other people to Jesus Christ then that person is really not a Christian at all.

Those who share in God's dreams and focus on others enormously benefit themselves.

Another way to think of our part in evangelism is as an investment. Imagine if we could know for certain that a stock would skyrocket in value over the next ten years. Every dollar invested will return \$1000. It's a sure thing. It will happen whether we invest or not. What would you do? I know what I would do. I would scrounge up every dollar I could find and invest it in that stock.

The dream of God is a sure thing. God will win millions of people to Jesus Christ whether we invest or not. And the returns will last for all eternity. What should we do? I think we should invest our interests, time and other resources into God's enterprise!

Another way of thinking about all of this is to compare to our own dreams. What are your personal dreams for your life? For many of us they are dreams about education, jobs, relationships, marriage, children, houses, health, retirement and long life. Do we expect God to invest in our dreams? Of course we do! We pray for God's help all the time. We want God to help make our dreams come true.

Fair's fair. We should also be interested and invested in God's dreams! True Christianity is coming to God with our hurts, needs, sins, prayers and dreams. But it is also serving God, giving to God, doing what God asks us to do and dreaming God's dreams along with him. It is participating with God in what he seeks to do.

There is an amazing supernatural mystery to how all this actually works. I'm not sure that I understand it, much less that I can explain it. But I have seen it a thousand times or more. It is that those who center their lives on themselves and their needs lose out. Those who share in God's dreams and focus on others enormously benefit themselves.

The same goes for the church as a whole. There is a constant temptation to focus on our need, our programs, our people and our buildings. But if we neglect God's dreams and those outside the church we become the losers when we could have been winners on God's team.

Let me tell you about my Uncle Herbert. Uncle Herbert lived with our family until his death many years ago. He was 88 years old when he died.

Uncle Herbert was a British immigrant to the

United States. He was a tool and die maker by trade, but he was also an investor in the stock market. He was never very wealthy, but when he died he had a portfolio of tens of thousands of dollar.

When I was about 20 years old he told me a story about an investment he never made. One day a salesman came knocking at his door in the early 1900s selling common stock for a few pennies a share. He was interested in buying stock so he heard the person out. But after careful consideration he decided to decline the offer and he bought no stock because he had never heard of the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. I think that for the rest of his life he regretted that he had missed out on one of the greatest opportunities of his life.

I don't want any of us to miss out on the great opportunities that God gives to us. He has great dreams, and he promises eternal returns. He invites every Christian to invest in his cause. He wants us to invest our time, our interests, our money, our prayers, our travel, our conversations with neighbors and lots more. May none of us be like Uncle Herbert who came to the end of his life and real-

ized that he had missed out on a great investment opportunity.

Decide today to make God's dreams your dreams. Then wait and see as God's dreams come true!

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