

Marriage....Whose Dream?

Do you have a dream for your marriage? If you had to write down your dream, would you start with,

"If only ..."

"If I could just have ..."

"If God would just give me ..."

and end with,

"THEN I could be happy"?

Most of us are pretty sure we know what we need to be happy. We know what we want God to do in our lives, in our marriages, in our spouses.

But sometimes Jesus takes us by surprise. He has a different plan. In John 6, for example, a whole group of people think they know exactly what they need from Jesus, but Jesus thinks otherwise. In this familiar story, Jesus turns a little boy's lunch into a meal for five thousand people, with leftovers to spare.

The crowd is amazed. This Man is tremendous! Everyone is buzzing, saying to one another, "This is the Messiah! He's come! Let's grab him and make him our king."

It would seem that this is the golden moment for Jesus. Didn't he come to be King of these people? And isn't he the Prophet of prophets?

Yes-but notice what Jesus does. He withdraws from their presence, and even disappears. The crowd looks all over for him, determined to make him their king. But he doesn't want anything to do with their plans. Why not? Isn't this why he came to earth?

Miracles and Signs

Let's see what he does next. John 6:25 reports that Jesus has crossed over to Galilee and the crowd finds him there.

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the work that God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "from now on, give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe." (vv. 25-36)

Jesus is saying to these people, "You've seen me, yes, but you've missed the whole point of why I am here."

John helps us understand what Jesus is getting at when he describes Jesus' miracles as signs. The people John talks about in chapter 6 have experienced the miracle of Jesus and the bread, but they have not realized that it is just a sign.

What does a sign do? It points to something else, to where you really want to be. When you take a vacation, you don't stop at the road sign with your family and say, "We're here! Unpack, honey!" You keep going until you reach your actual destination. The sign only points you in the right direction, to the real thing.

And so, in John's story, the physical blessing of bread-the miracle-was meant to point to a much deeper spiritual reality: Jesus himself.

Christ was saying, in effect, "You're not getting it. You're concentrating on the miracle of the bread, as if the bread, and not I myself, were the ultimate need of your lives." Their bellies had been filled, but they had not yet been truly fed.

What was behind the crowd's interest in Christ? What did the people really want? In other words, what kind of Messiah were they hoping he would be?

It seems that these people were not pursuing Christ out of humble submission and a willingness to follow him wherever he would lead. Instead, they were hoping that Christ would give them what they felt they needed for life. Thus, their pursuit of Christ was born not out of love for him but out of love for self.

What Is Your Dream?

Now consider your own life and your hopes for your marriage. Whose dream are you bringing before Jesus: yours or his? Do you want what he wants for you in your marriage? Or is your dream shaped by your own personal definition of a paradise marriage? Of the ultimate husband or ideal wife?

What is the deepest level of your hunger today? Is it for your own dream, or is it for Jesus himself-his joy, love, and perfect rule over your life?

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves of what Jesus gave us when he offered himself as our Savior. Consider the message of 1 Peter 1:3-5:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade-kept in heaven· for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Peter is saying, "Do you understand what you have? You have been chosen to be saved by God's mercy. Your sins have been forgiven. You are part of God's family. And not only that, there's an inheritance waiting for you that won't ever spoil, perish, or fade!"

Peter has reminded us of the past: we've been forgiven by God's mercy. And we have this inheritance that's coming-that's the future. Most of us would agree, "That's pretty wonderful." But what's happening in between, in the here and now?

Peter's answer begins with verse 5:

. . . who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief and all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith-of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (vv. 5-9)

What is Peter telling us about the "now," and what does it mean for our marriages? He's telling us that "now" is about something much deeper than getting up in the morning with a smile, or romantic weekends, or fulfilling intimacy.

Peter is teaching us that God is willing to compromise these seemingly essential aspects of marriage in order to produce something greater, fuller, and deeper in our lives: genuine faith.

This is what God is after in the midst of those painful experiences that cause us to wonder if he really loves us and hears our prayers; the times when we find ourselves envying other believers and even those who don't yet know the Lord.

Such troubling experiences are sent our way because God is not done with us yet.

In the midst of trial, he is giving us the goal of our faith: the salvation of our souls. And what we need to learn to say in response is not "God, why me?" but "God, thank you. Give me more. I want everything that You know I need. I realize now that the struggle of this moment is not a mistake after all. It's an act of Your perfect, redemptive love."

This sort of response does not come naturally to us; it runs counter to what lies deep in our hearts as sinners. What we wish is not only that life would be easy, but that it would be a resort.

The greatest marketing concept in Western culture right now is the all-inclusive resort. You pay your money and get whatever you want, whenever you want it. Someone explained one of these deals to me by saying they include "twelve stated meals a day." He said, "The last meal is at midnight, but at 2:00 A.M. you can order pizza in your room if you want." Sounds like fun to me. No one can say no to you! At any moment, you can decide to do whatever you want.

If God wanted life to be a resort, this is what it would be like. But we need to look at our lives in the here and now with different eyes, and see that God has placed each one of us in the resort of his choosing!

The blessing that God gives you in your family, in the husband and wife relationship, in your physical life, are meant to point to a deeper and fuller blessing: the actual presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in your life. He is life abundant-not your husband or wife, your house, or your children. Jesus Christ is ours, and we are his.

Our Deepest Hunger

In John 6, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." We need to ask ourselves, "What kind of bread do I really hunger for? What kind of bread do I really want to feed on?"

Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't seek to improve our marriages and families. But I think that we can miss the point. We can be like the people who pursued Jesus, wanting him only insofar as he was able to keep their stomachs full.

Are you coming to Jesus because you're holding onto your dream and you hope that somehow, some way, Jesus will help you get it? If that's all you want from him, then you're going to be miserably disappointed if your dreams don't come true. If you are living for earthly bread, and that's your source of life, you're in big trouble when you don't receive it.

But if you're living for spiritual bread for a deeper communion with the Lord Jesus Christ, then your marriage relationship becomes a wonderful place to live that out.

When two people are committed to Christ and long to know him better, more fully, and more deeply, they will experience unity and intimacy that unbelievers cannot know. Their lives will be transformed into expressions of praise and worship and glory to him.

Only by getting their own selves out of the way is it possible for them to know unity in the Spirit as children of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so a more satisfying unity as husband and wife will follow.

People whose eyes are just on the physical bread will end up devouring each other because the physical bread alone cannot ever satisfy. You will be a parasite on your mate, sucking his or her blood: but he or she will never, ever, give you enough.

There's only one Bread-it's Jesus. And life is found in feeding on him by faith.

Do you know what happened when Jesus proclaimed that message-when he said that unless you eat his bread and drink his blood, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven (John 6:53-59)? Not only did the crowd forsake him, but Scripture says that many of his disciples left as well (v. 66). They basically said, "Lord, this is a hard teaching."

And it is, isn't it?

When Dreams Crumble

I once was talking with a lady who had been married many years. She was married to a person who, very honestly, I would have to say was a bad man. He was angry, controlling, and manipulative. He said and did hurtful things. She had dreamed of the ultimate husband, but she certainly hadn't gotten him. Now she was so embittered by the blessings other women in her church enjoyed that she said she could no longer go to worship. She felt as if God had forsaken her, so much so, that she couldn't read her Bible or pray.

As I listened, I wanted her to understand her identity in Christ. I wanted her to know the love of the Lord; that God is a refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. So, I started reading her passages that spoke of the amazing, abundant love of God, and in the middle of a verse she said, "Stop! Don't tell me again that God loves me. I want a husband who loves me!" And she pounded her fist on her chair as she said it.

Her dream had definitely crumbled. What were her options? How would Jesus want her to respond in her situation?

Let's answer that question by looking at ourselves. If your dream were to dissolve in front of your eyes, how would you react? Let's be honest now! Would you:

- fall into self-pity?

- lash out in blame?
- get swallowed up by envy and covetousness?
- doubt the goodness of God?
- find it hard to read the Bible, to pray, to fellowship, to worship?

These kinds of responses reveal that you are living for earthly bread.

How can we be different? Scripture gives us a rich example in the book of Habakkuk, an Old Testament prophet. Habakkuk looked around at the people of God and said, "God, I don't understand what's going on here. You've allowed Your people to be very wicked. You're a holy God. I don't understand what You're doing. Why don't You do something about this?" And God said, "Okay, I will. I'll send an evil, violent nation from the north to come down and wipe them out."

And the prophet said, "What?!" He'd been thinking revival Judgment was not in his catalog! He said, "God, how can You do this? How can You use a nation more evil than we are to judge us? It doesn't make any sense!" But after Habakkuk had this battle with God, God began to reveal his power and his glory to him. In fact, God's love and care were so real to Habakkuk that he ended his book with these powerful words:

**Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD.
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.
(3:17-19)**

What has he just described about a farming culture? There's nothing left: no plants, no trees, no animals. Habakkuk sees all the devastation, yet responds with joy!

If your dream for your marriage were to crumble, if your marriage were to appear dry and bare, could you still rise and say, "I am full of joy because the Lord is Lord of my life, and gloriously, in the midst of all the struggle, I have him"?

It is truly possible to know Jesus in this way, but it requires a choice: Will you pursue your dream, or will you pursue the Lord's dream for you?

Here's the reality: God's goodness, love, power, strength, and glory-and his call to you-do not change when your situation seems bleak and empty. He is still there and he still satisfies.

What is the deepest hunger of your heart today? Oh, that it would be for Christ! If your hunger is for him, your marriage will bring wonderful opportunities for mutual growth and sanctification. They may come in the midst of trial Life may not be a resort. But in the end you and your spouse will look more like Christ and be much closer to him.

Whose dream are you seeking? May God help us to be people who see the sign behind the miracle, who can look at earthly blessings and say, "These blessings point me to a deeper, fuller reality of Christ in my life. I want my life to be about communion, fellowship, submission, love, and obedience to the precious Lord Jesus Christ."

The Messiah has come! Let's follow him by faith. Let's rise up in the morning-no matter what is going on in our marriage-and say, "I am so full of joy. I am a child of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. He is in my life. I will follow him by faith."

Lord, it is so easy to get caught up in our own desires and dreams. It's so easy to think of You as the deliverer of our dreams, so easy to be excited like the multitude and lose sight of the spiritual reality behind the miracle. Lord, I pray that we would not just pursue our own hopes and dreams, but that we would express a hunger and thirst for Jesus Christ, and a desire to know his will in every area in our lives. We want Christ to rule in every room in our homes. We want Christ to rule in the darkest recesses of our hearts. We want to live in joyful submission and feed on You by faith. May we have joy, and faith, and courage even when we aren't experiencing physical bread. In those experiences of trial, may we say, "Thank You, Lord, for Your love-You are completing Your saving work." God, help us. In Jesus' name, Amen.