

How These 3 Prophetic Dreams Changed the Course of History

Though many Christians know the nativity story by heart, very few have considered the role dreams played in the birth and early life of Jesus. The first Christmas was not merely adjacent to prophetic dreams, but the direct result of them. Three prophetic dreams led to the birth, witness and rescue of Jesus Christ, yet so few believers contemplate the significance of these miracles. These dreams are not just plot points in a story; they're true events that changed the course of history. Moreover, many people still receive prophetic dreams today—and they're just as powerful now as they were 2,000 years ago.

When it comes to the Christmas narrative, it's easy to tune out and imagine we already know the story. Longtime Christians have heard the nativity account countless times. But how many times have listeners truly paid attention to its prophetic implications?

This Christmas, I challenge you to consider these three dreams and experience the nativity with fresh eyes.

First Dream

Joseph was a righteous man. Having lived as a good Jew in Israelite society of the first century, he had certain assumptions about life and society that are almost foreign to us today. The society around him had its own ideas about how things were and how they should be. Yet a prophetic dream led him to make a radically countercultural decision.

When Joseph had to choose whether to wed a pregnant Mary, it was no small decision. Today, it is not uncommon for unmarried people to have kids before getting married—but that was not the case in ancient Israel.

Joseph's decision not to "put away" Mary was a social statement, one that everyone understood. If Joseph married her, he was implicitly saying, "Hey, everyone, I'm the guy who couldn't wait to get married." There was seemingly no other reason a good Jew would marry a pregnant woman—it had to be his fault. After all, who would believe either Joseph or Mary if they said it was God who made her pregnant? Everyone would label them as not only fornicators but liars.

Another crucial aspect modern readers overlook is that Jewish society was completely based on Torah observance. Someone who would cut corners on their commitment to God could not be trusted in anything. This decision affected that person's business as well.

Joseph was a carpenter. Back then, you didn't go to the store to buy furniture; you went to a carpenter and told him what you wanted. If Joseph would cheat by getting Mary pregnant before they were married and then say God did it, how could he be trusted to make a good chair? Perhaps he would cut corners, lie about the materials or do a poor job. That's what most people in that society would have thought.

So when Joseph chose to go ahead with his marriage to Mary, it was not a light matter. What prompted him to make such a weighty decision that would affect his social, economic and religious status so negatively? A dream.

"Then Joseph her husband, being a just man and not willing to make her a public example, had in mind to divorce her privately. But while he thought on these things, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for He who is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.' ... Then Joseph, being awakened from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and remained with his wife" (Matt. 1:19-21, 24).

Imagine knowing a decision you are facing would shape the rest of your life. Would you be willing to make that decision based on a dream?

Second Dream

The wise men had the second dream that is almost hidden in the Christmas story. These men were obviously important and had political clout. They showed up in a new country and went straight to its ruler to get directions. Not many people can do that. The wise men must have had some level of reputation or authority that gave them access to politicians.

Politicians are a funny bunch, especially when they are kings. They expect things to be done their way, and they expect (and deserve) the respect that comes with their position. But Herod was no average politician; he had his own reputation. He would kill people who stood in his way, who didn't agree with him or whom he felt were a threat. He had a pretty big ego, as evidenced by the building projects he took on—many to further his own reputation.

Herod gave the wise men the directions they sought, but he asked for something in return. Matthew 2:7-8 says, "Then Herod, when he had privately called the wise men, carefully inquired of them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search diligently for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word again, so that I may come and worship Him also.'"

However, the wise men decided to ignore Herod's request to come back and tell him where the child was. This could not have been an easy decision, and it would have international repercussions. It could affect trade between their countries. The wise men certainly would not be welcomed back in the region. And their decision could even affect the wise men's relationship and reputation with the leaders of their own land.

This was a big deal, but the Bible mentions it almost offhandedly: “But being warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route” (Matt. 2:12).

How much importance must you place on dreams to base pivotal decisions on them? Some may simply respond, “They were wise men who went to another country because they saw a star rise in the sky; they were weird like that.” Perhaps, but the wise men were not the only ones led by dreams. Joseph and Mary received one more crucial prophetic dream.

Third Dream

Matthew 2:13-15a narrates the Christmas story’s final prophetic dream: “Now when they departed, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word. For Herod will seek the young Child to kill Him.’ When he rose, he took the young Child and His mother by night, and departed into Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.”

This story is so familiar readers often don’t realize what it meant to the people in the narrative, so let’s put these events in a modern-day setting. Imagine you live in the Midwest region of the United States. You are young, have only been married 12 to 18 months and have just settled in a new town. Your husband has just started a new business, your home is comfortable, and you are starting to develop a nice support system with your new friends and neighbors. Your toddler has just started walking, and you can finally get a full night’s sleep—most of the time.

At 3 a.m., your husband shakes you awake: “Honey, get up! We need to move. Can you go get the baby and grab what you need? I’ll pack a few bags—whatever we can fit in the car. We have to move to Mexico.”

“Mexico, what?” you say, still groggy. “Can’t we talk about this in the morning? We’re not going to move.”

“Yes, Mexico!” he replies. “And we can’t talk about it in the morning; we need to leave right now! Go grab the baby and meet me in the car!”

“Why is this so urgent?” you would surely insist. “Why can’t it wait until we talk about it?”

Then he replies, “Because I just had a dream, and we need to leave now!”

What’s more likely: that you would follow your frantic husband to Mexico, or that you would roll over, pull the blankets tight and go back to bed? I’d guess the latter.

Thankfully, that was not Mary’s response. She got up, and they left for Egypt that night before the sun came up. What would have happened if they had not paid attention to that dream? Herod sent soldiers to Bethlehem and killed all the male children. Had they not left, Jesus would have died with them.

If I were God, I would not have put such an important message in a dream—but thankfully, I am not God. He has chosen to speak to His people in dreams, and He chose to make those dreams the central method by which He guided Joseph in the birth and early years of Jesus’ life. God trusted the life of His Son to a dream, so He must feel they are important.

Not only did God see dreams as important, but Joseph and Mary believed they were too. They made life-altering decisions based on dreams. They valued dreams in a way today’s believers do not. I would suggest their beliefs were closer to the biblical pattern than our modern mistrust of dreams.

Biblical Dreams

The story of Jesus’ birth is not the only place we find dreams in the Bible. Prophetic dreams can be found throughout.

Abraham, whom Paul called the “father of faith,” was given the covenant that our covenant springs from in a dream. Genesis 15 tells us a deep sleep fell on Abram, and then God spoke to him, telling him of the Egyptian slavery and exodus and promising that the land of Israel would be given to his descendants.

In Genesis 28:10-22, Jacob had one of the most famous dreams in the Bible. He saw a stairway or ladder into heaven, angels ascending and descending, and God standing there promising never to leave Him, to be his God and to bring him back to the land of Israel and give it to his descendants.

In Numbers 12:6, when God speaks to Moses, Aaron and Miriam and defends Moses’ position as His friend, He says, “Hear now My word. If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make Myself known to him in a vision, and I will speak to him in a dream.”

Later, God visited Solomon in a dream and offered him anything he wanted (1 Kings 3:5). Solomon chose wisdom and became the wisest person ever because of an encounter with God in a dream.

And God sent dreams to more than just His most extraordinary followers. Pharaoh saw the next 14 years of his country in a dream. Nebuchadnezzar saw the future world powers and the coming of the Messiah, as well as his own madness, in a dream. The cupbearer and the baker who were in prison with Joseph both had prophetic dreams about their future. A Midianite soldier saw Gideon winning the battle in a dream. In a dream, Pilate’s wife was tormented by the realization that Jesus was innocent.

The prophets dreamed. The people of God had dreams. Even those outside of covenant with God had important dreams.

So what about us?

Should we still expect God to speak in dreams?

The answer is given clearly at the birth of the church. In Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on those gathered in the upper room, the sound of a rushing wind drew a crowd, and tongues of fire sat on the heads of those filled. They spoke with tongues and were physically affected by this outpouring.

During this visitation, Peter stood up to explain what was going on to the gathered crowd and quoted from Joel 2: “‘In the last days it shall be,’ says God, ‘that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even on My menservants and maidservants I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy’” (Acts 2:17-18).

This proclamation of the time of the Spirit on God’s people was marked by prophecy, visions and dreams. The time of the end, the last days, will be full of these phenomena. Peter said that time started right then, and it did. If those were the last days, we are at the last of the last days.

Today’s Dreams

I have met people around the world whose lives have been changed by a dream or a dream interpretation.

When I was in South Korea, I met a young man who had fled there because he had become a Christian. He was born and raised in Islam. When he surrendered to Jesus, he and his family were in danger. He told me he had come to know the Lord through a dream.

In his dream, buildings around him started to crumble, and he was trying to find a safe place. The dust from the rubble was so thick he couldn’t see, and he was afraid. A man walked up to him with a lantern in his hand and said, “My son, would you

like to be safe?"

My friend said, "Yes," and the man said to follow him. They walked through the dust, and when it cleared, the young man realized he was in a church. That was when he woke up.

Being a good Muslim, he ignored the dream. After all, it is not good for Muslims to be in a church. It took him most of that day to shake off the troubling feeling and tell himself it was just a dream. That night, it repeated. He woke again, very disturbed. He couldn't ignore this dream. He found the phone number to a church, called the pastor and gave his life to Jesus. Shortly after, he fled the country, and I met him in time to encourage him to be baptized and give him his first Bible.

This man's life was changed by a dream! Thousands of others could tell similar stories. Business plans have come in dreams that shifted the business to a new level. Scientific breakthroughs and inventions like the sewing machine have been given in dreams. New songs, stories, movies and poems have come in dreams. Warnings that saved lives and changed communities have come in dreams.

God is more than willing to speak through prophetic dreams if we are willing to pay attention to them. Sometimes, we don't have because we don't ask (James 4:2b). If you want to hear God this way, pray this prayer:

Father, I realize that You speak through dreams, and I want to hear You in every way You speak. Forgive me for not paying attention to my dreams and learning how You speak through them. I ask that You would give me dreams and help me remember them. I ask that You would show me what my dreams mean so I can respond to what You tell me. Help me to know which dreams are from You and which are not. I choose to value dreams from You. Thank You for the gift of Your Son and the gift of a living relationship with You that comes through Him. It is in

His name I pray. Amen!

God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. He used dreams to guide Jesus' parents, ensure they married, save their lives and even tell them when to come back from Egypt and in what area they should live to raise Jesus.

The original Christmas story brimmed with dreams—will yours?
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