



THE BIG PICTURE

SEEING GOD'S DREAM
FOR YOUR LIFE

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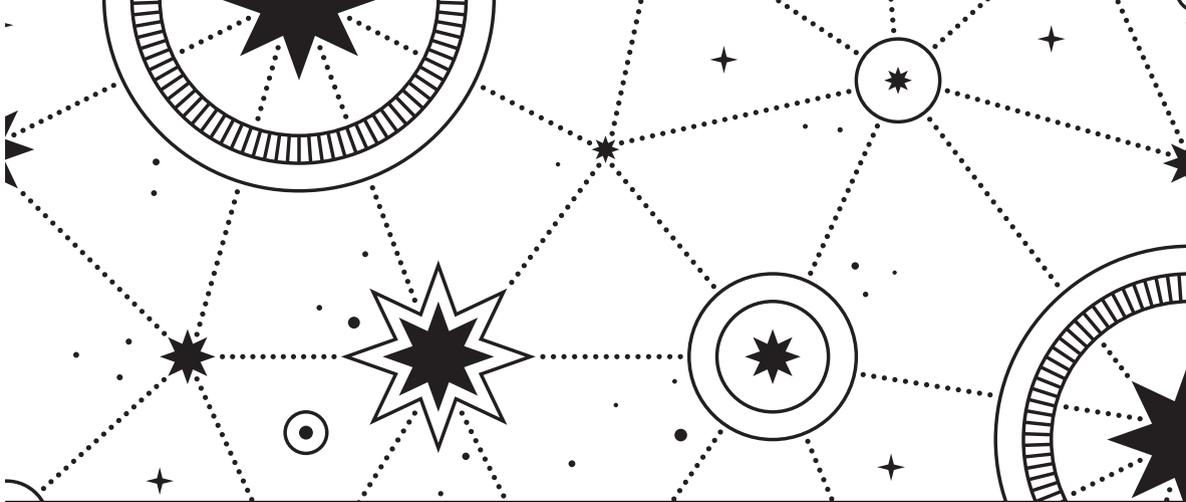
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A DREAMER'S PRAYER

God, I want your dream for my life.

Nothing smaller.

Nothing limited.

Nothing inherited.

Nothing compared.

Nothing muted.

Your big, expansive dream.

Impossible for me to see without you.

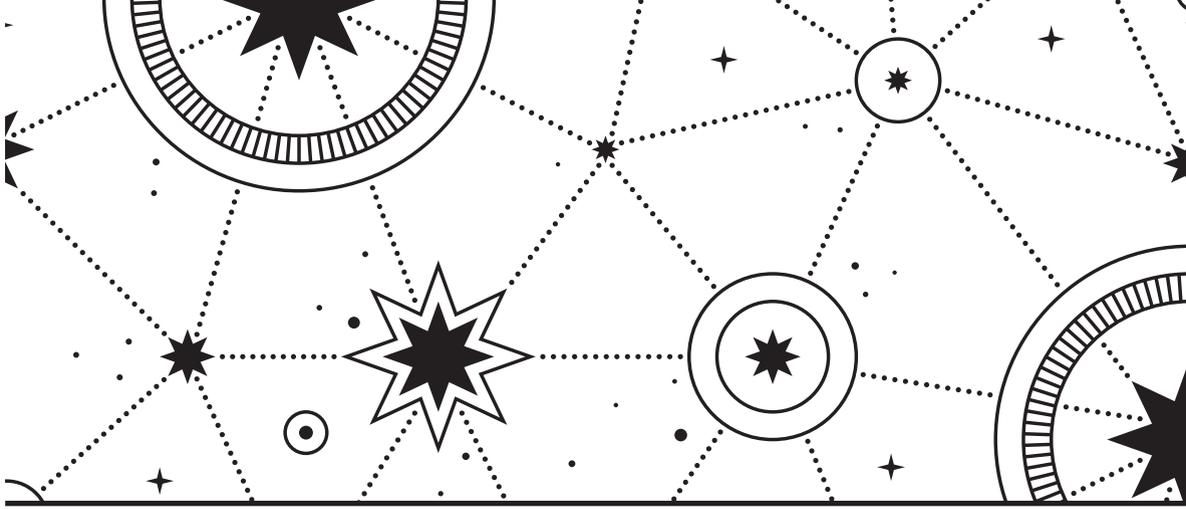
Impossible for me to do without you.

Impossible for me to be without you.

Let me dream.

Let me dream.

Let me dream, again.



INTRODUCTION

Our daughter Olivia looked intently, but still couldn't see it. Here was yet another homework assignment designed to increase her love for counting. The sheet was covered with small dots and corresponding numbers. To a young mind that was still learning to count to one hundred, the dots seemed so random. She stared hopelessly at the page trying to identify the image, with no luck. The first attempt at connecting the dots by random plotting proved unsuccessful. We could always see the image, but she couldn't. Frustration grew. Confidence lowered. We had to reread the directions. When cooler heads prevailed, Olivia started with the number 1 and began connecting the dots, one by one. Slowly but surely, the pencil made the connections to the ascending numbers and a picture started to emerge. I could see it, but she had to finish the process to recognize it. After the last dot was connected, a familiar image was now visible. Frustration lowered. Confidence increased. Then the coloring commenced after a verbal affirmation of our child's own work. The dots were not so random after all.

Introduction

Life is not as easy as a connect-the-dots puzzle, but it's quite similar. You won't be able to see the picture at first. You think you will, but you won't. If you believe you can predict it, you'll be disappointed. *Much of what God will do in your life, you won't see coming.* You will try your best to make sense of what's in front of you, but it will seem confusing and disconnected in the moment. We see a dot of God here. We experience a dot of God there, and another just up ahead, but we aren't sure how it all connects or if it connects at all. The picture will be hard to decipher. It will look like a random scattering of dots. We encounter familiar feelings of frustration. It leaves us trying to connect and make sense out of seemingly disjointed moments. What was the purpose behind this setback? Why did God bring this person into my life? Why did God let them leave? What is God trying to show me? The people we meet will appear random, the decisions pointless, and the places insignificant. You won't see the big picture.

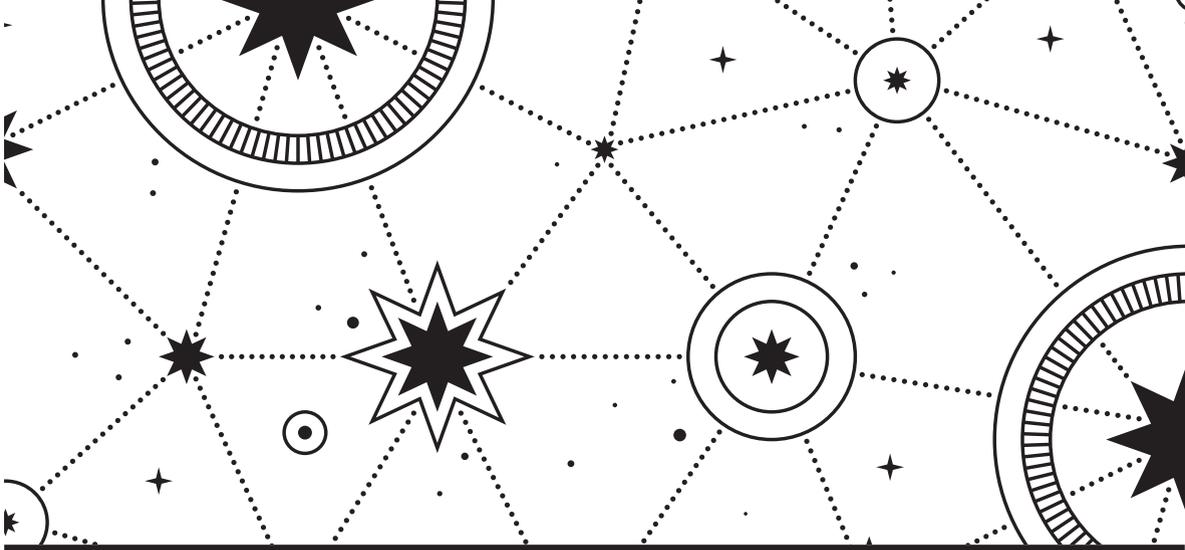
Søren Kierkegaard once said, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." This is an affirmation of our willingness to reflect on the past, but it's also a confession of the things we miss in the moment. It's an acknowledgment of our inability to truly understand the present. We forge ahead, pushing through our joys and sorrows. However, most of us can agree that many of the lessons and transformative experiences we have are understood only in hindsight. We see the value—after the fact. This is especially true when our experiences are painful or difficult. We thank God for those instances when we can file them away as things of the past. We embrace the lessons learned when they are finally in our rearview mirror. But let's be honest: they don't feel like that in the moment. The lessons feel like punishments. What we now call a blessing

once felt like a curse. The source of today's joy was a previous thorn in our side. It's difficult to see or even recognize the value of God's movement in our lives in the present.

Another writer describes it in this manner:

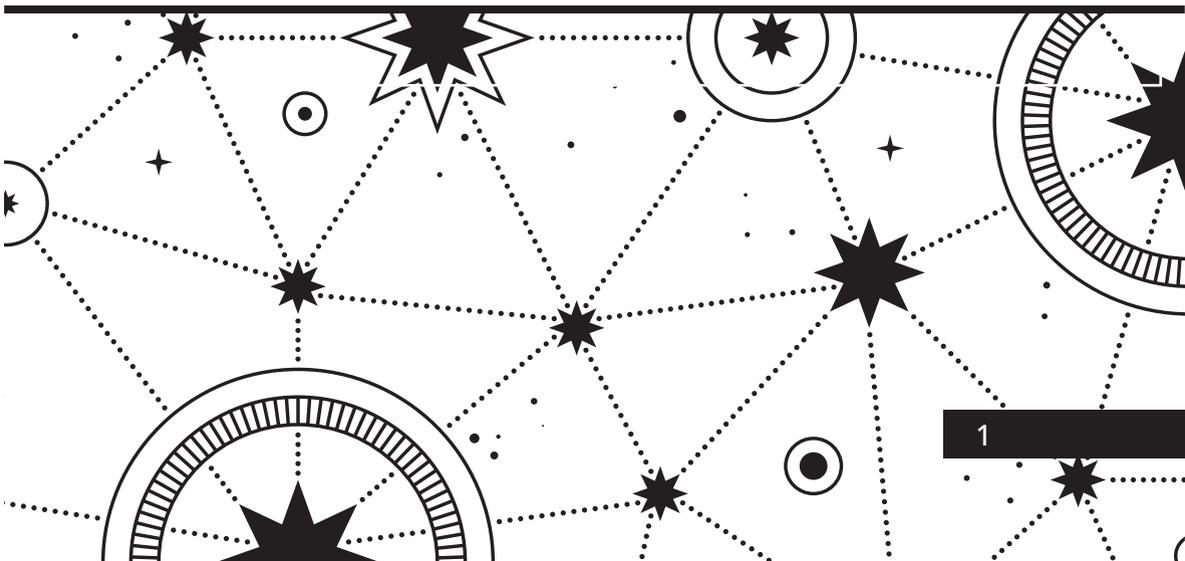
"When things go unnoticed for too long, bad things begin to happen. A leaky roof turns into a major repair of an entire wall; unattended weeds eventually squelch the growth of the vegetables; a 'not that big-a-deal' lump over time becomes cancerous; an undisciplined child later in life lacks a healthy sense of boundary. . . . Time has a way of forcing things to get the attention they need. Many in our culture have lived with a sense of 'unnoticedness' for too long. And it's time for us to take notice."¹

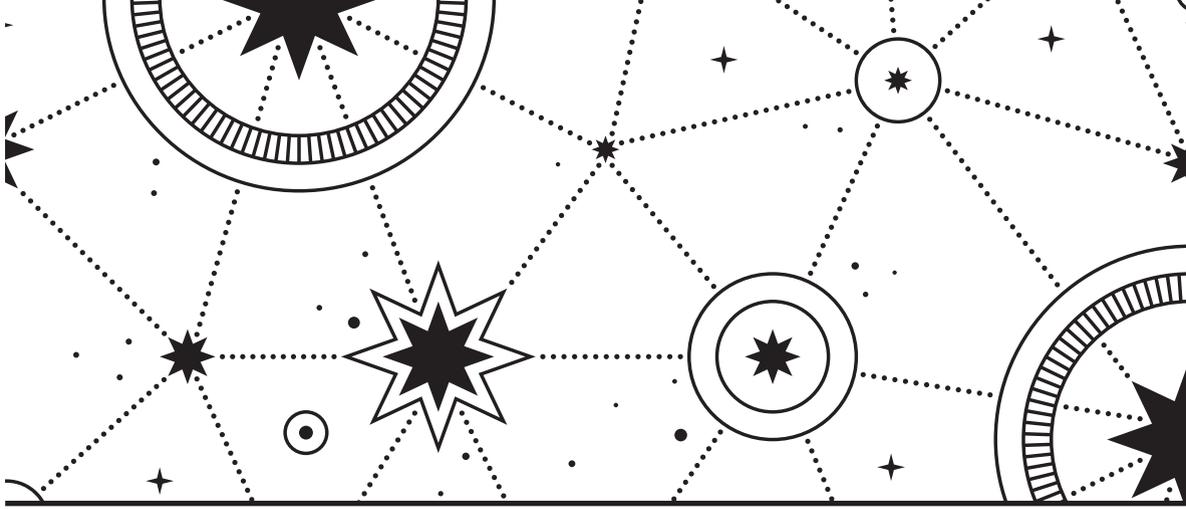
This book is an invitation to take notice. It's a journey of discovering and rediscovering the presence of God in our lives. It's an invitation into the continual process of connecting the seemingly random moments that may have gone unnoticed or overlooked. It's courageously looking back in order to look forward. When we start connecting the dots, we see not only a God that has been present, but a God that is still very much active in our lives today. Because it's only when the dots start to connect that we see beyond the moment, beyond this season, and begin to see "the Big Picture." It's here that frustration decreases and confidence increases. This will be important on our journey together, for this reason: most of what God will do in your life you won't see coming. You think you will, but you won't.



CHAPTER 1

I CAN'T SEE IT





CHAPTER 1

I CAN'T SEE IT

Jevon

Joseph had a dream and told it to his brothers, which made them hate him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had. When we were binding stalks of grain in the field, my stalk got up and stood upright, while your stalks gathered around it and bowed down to my stalk."

His brothers said to him, "Will you really be our king and rule over us?" So they hated him even more because of the dreams he told them.

Then Joseph had another dream and described it to his brothers: "I've just dreamed again, and this time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

When he described it to his father and brothers, his father scolded him and said to him, "What kind of dreams have you dreamed? Am I and your mother and your brothers supposed to come and bow down to the ground in front of you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father took careful note of the matter.

(Genesis 37:5-11)

It Was All a Dream

We begin our journey at the start of a familiar story. Joseph is the second-youngest son of his father, Jacob; one of thirteen children. Joseph's life takes a turn at the age of seventeen when he starts having dreams. We aren't told the manner in which these dreams occurred, but it's clear that they would impact the rest of his life. It's possible these were visions that came to him in the middle of the night while he was sound asleep. Or maybe he was going about his daily work in the fields and started daydreaming during his down time. The how really didn't matter to Joseph, nor should it for us. He had the dreams. And when dreams come, things won't be the same.

In his first dream, Joseph envisions that he is out in the fields bundling grain and something unexpected happens. The grain has a mind of its own. His bundle stands upright and the bundles belonging to his brothers start bowing down to his (Genesis 37:6-7). His second dream is similar, but with imagery that seems to be more confusing than the first. This time, he sees the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing at his feet (37:9).

What does it all mean? Bundles of grain don't stand or bow by themselves. The sun, moon, and stars don't bow before anything. The imagery of his dreams, and its implication, raises a host of questions. Where did these dreams originate? Were they just figments of his imagination? Were they just wishful thinking? Could they be messages from God? Are they something Joseph's subconscious mind created out of spite? Why this? Why now? What was God up to?

The dots don't connect. Joseph can't see it. He doesn't understand it. Sounds absurd, doesn't it?

Joseph was a dreamer born into an average family with average problems in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by average people. There is no compelling evidence that Joseph was overly ambitious or obsessed with visions of grandeur. He was favored by his father, but he did not have a history of chasing after power and status. Yet, every day, while Jacob's sons were laboring in the fields, someone with big dreams existed in their midst.

We walk past them every day. We sit next to them at coffee shops. We stand in line behind them at the grocery stores. You work with them. You sit next to them in the pews in church. We may even see them when we look in the mirror. They aren't always loud. They don't always post their ideas on social media or spend time perfecting their vision boards. Sometimes they don't look like dreamers. But they are ordinary people who are open to receiving a word and vision from God. They don't see it, at least not all of it, right away. We don't see it. Joseph didn't see it. The dots were not lining up. Joseph never saw this coming.

Alternatives We Have Never Considered

I love repeats and reruns. I spend most of my time watching shows that have already aired. Nicole and I have watched every spin-off of *Law and Order* imaginable. It feels like I personally know Captain Benson and Detective Stabler, and Jack McCoy has been a topic of conversation on several occasions. The show *Martin* is and will always be a classic. I can recite every line spoken by the security guard Otis, and act out every scene by Dragon Fly Jones. I will stand on my belief that

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A Different World never gets old. There is something comfortable and familiar about reruns. The endings are predictable. The characters are familiar. I can't be the only one who loves reruns, because some of these actors still get paid an exorbitant amount of money from syndication as their shows continue to air year after year.

Joseph's life was destined to play out like a rerun. It was stuck on repeat. He had been trained to continue the family business as planned. The area where their father had settled would be the place where he would live out the rest of his days. There were ten older brothers, and each one lived the same episode. Except for the firstborn, they all had similar expectations for their lives. They would watch their father's flocks, grow their herds, get married, have children, and continue the story. Joseph got a chance to watch ten seasons of this show. Doing something different was neither encouraged nor readily available. His options were anything but plentiful. On the surface, there were no variations to this predictable ending. His life was going to be a rerun—good, familiar, but not unpredictable. So he thought.

So we often think. As the days continue to pass by in our lives, we become locked into a routine. There are times we find comfort in the rhythm. It's what we know. It's what we have mastered. We know the characters. We know the endings. There are few surprises. That is, until God shows us that something different is possible.

When Joseph started dreaming, it was God's way of showing him a new future. God showed him that a different life was possible. That mere glimpse inside of the unimaginable exposes him to a world of possibilities. It allows Joseph—and us—to reconsider and reimagine what we once thought was fixed and no longer up for negotiation. *Before the dream gives clarity, it provides what many people think is lost: options.* The

dreams get Joseph's mind turning and upend what he took for granted. The images and pictures in his mind start to expand. What else is possible that he has yet to consider? The future we imagined in our minds starts to crumble, and that which we pictured starts to take a different shape. We have options we'd never previously considered. This is what happens when a person gets exposed to another way of using their gifts that they have never considered. It's what happens when someone changes their profession later in life. It's the person who grows up in a troubled family and then realizes that this doesn't have to be their story too. It's the individual who thought their life was headed in a certain direction, but sees something, hears something, and gets exposed to an outcome that they never thought was possible. It's seeing someone with a similar background in a particular role that opens one's eyes to the possibilities. It can be one of the most freeing and redemptive moments along our faith journey. One of the most impactful pictures that God can show us is when God reminds us that something different is possible.

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The freedom of the dream brings challenges that we must welcome. When you've been exposed to this new world of possibilities, it's hard to see life through the same vantage

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point. The fields that Joseph visited every day for the past seventeen years suddenly take on a new meaning. The office where we work doesn't look the same. Certain friendships are reevaluated. Joseph can no longer gather grain in the same manner as he did before the grand vision. While everyone else is working, I can imagine him daydreaming about the bundles standing up and bowing down. Every time the sun and moon rise and set, Joseph is reminded of what's possible.

Most importantly, he sees himself differently. He is not just another son in a long line of siblings. Could it be that God has a different future for him? While he can't understand or comprehend the meaning of this dream, it gives him a picture of himself that he's never considered. Are we ready for a dream that not only challenges our plans, but who God wants us to become? The dream changes our future, but in the process it changes us. It shows us a version of ourselves that we didn't think was possible. It forces us to reevaluate the narrow version of self that we've always imagined.

This is as challenging as it is inspirational. Rarely does God intervene in our lives to give us a picture of what we have already seen or accomplished. The nature of its arrival signals that something different is at hand. This will be hard for many to embrace. Even the images and ideas that we conjure in our minds are limiting. When we close our eyes, our minds drift to familiar possibilities. The pictures and images that form are often based on past experiences. It happens to the best of us, even down to the smallest detail. The people we see are familiar faces. The places are the ones that are known. Even the outcomes are predictable. We love our repeats. We think about the money and the resources that we have available. The picture that we see is filtered through our background, our

résumé, our failures, and our connections. If we aren't careful, the image brought to mind by the dream simply becomes a glorified rerun. However, that is not what God wants to do in our lives. God did not mysteriously intervene in the life of Joseph to give him a picture that he had already seen. The presence of God in our lives is not a call to simply repeat the things we have already accomplished. It challenges the very notion of what we deem to be possible. The dream might not resemble anything you've seen or have previously experienced. It's hard to see what we have never considered to be a possibility.

A Dream with No Details

Many readers accuse Joseph of being arrogant and without tact as he shares his dreams with his brothers. Thanks to their father's favoritism, Joseph's brothers already hate him. Now he seems to rub his dreams in the faces of the very people who despised him. Joseph is often portrayed as a petty sibling with a vendetta to settle. Is it possible that he's making an already complicated relationship worse? Absolutely. He is not the favorite on his brothers' lists. Is it possible that sharing his dream will cause even more tension? Possibly.

But isn't it also possible that Joseph is just looking for somebody to help him connect the dots? Isn't it just as likely that he doesn't comprehend his own dreams, and he's looking for someone who knows him to help him make sense of the things that he's seen?

Remember, Joseph was only seventeen years old when he started having these dreams. I don't know what you were like at seventeen, but I don't think I was mature enough to understand every move that God was making in my life. I didn't then, and

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I still don't. Perhaps Joseph is coming to his brothers with his dreams because he's looking for answers. He is searching for an explanation for the meaning of these dreams and visions. He is searching for clarity. He's seeking understanding.

Isn't this a familiar search? At the core of what we desire is finding the answers to what we can't understand. We couldn't see what purpose a particular obstacle served, so we searched for answers. We couldn't see why this person came into our lives. We didn't know why they left. We couldn't see how something promised was going to unfold. Much of what we desire from God are answers to the unanswered questions about life.

We have even become proficient at trying to coerce the answers when we reach a point of desperation. We surrender ourselves to spiritual disciplines designed to get the attention of God. We fast. We pray. We plan a revival. We engage in this or that spiritual practice in hopes of finding the right answers that we believe are hidden in a divine vault. While I don't doubt the power of intentionally seeking after God, I'm not certain it's always so simple and formulaic.

One of the biggest misconceptions about faith is that it gives us all the answers. Here is the real, unadulterated truth: an honest walk with God will lend you more questions than answers. It will yield more mystery. It will unearth more uncertainty than what existed previously. The pastor of Change Church, Dharius Daniels, refers to these moments as "seasons of ambiguity." These are periods in our lives where the purpose or moves of God are veiled. We aren't sure of the next steps. The present is confusing, and the future appears uncertain. There is no escaping the hard truth that every faith journey comes with seasons of ambiguity. The picture isn't clear.

***An honest walk with God
will lend you more
questions than answers.***

And yet, there is one promise God does not make. God never promises our complete understanding. God gives us a lot of assurance. God promises us that God will never leave us or forsake us. God promises us that our needs will be met according to God's riches and glory. God promises unconditional love, presence, power, forgiveness, and even life beyond the grave. Yet of all the promises that we find within the Bible, there is not one that hints at God's commitment for us to always understand or have absolute clarity.

Many people give up on faith, disconnect from God, or lose faith in themselves because when they were looking for answers, it seemed like all they received was ambiguity. They didn't abandon their search for answers; they just committed to finding them through other means. Can we really trust God when we have more questions than answers?

And yet, questions without answers, or at least without easy answers, seems to be a pattern with God. God consistently operates in ambiguity. Think about how much ambiguity is surrounding Joseph's dreams. Joseph's brothers will bow down to him. That's it, and even that is open to interpretation. In the dreams, it's the bundles of grain and heavenly bodies that bow. It seems like these represent the brothers, but does Joseph know that for sure? And even if he accepts that, there's no indication of how or when it will come about. God gives Joseph

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a dream with no details! There was no commentary. No fine print. No explanations or interpretations. The dreams brought more questions than clarity. God gave Joseph just enough to stir the pot, but not enough to clear the air. It is just enough to instill hope but not enough to decrease anxiety. This is a difficult dream to embrace without much detail. God could have easily explained to Joseph why this was going to happen, when it was going to unfold. God could have reassured him with an outline showing how all the dots would connect. However, God does not fill in the gaps. God does not offer any helpful information to lower Joseph's anxiety.

At least God is consistent! This is exactly how God acts when instructing Abraham and Sarah to seek out the promised land. God approaches an elderly couple in their seasoned years with the promise of a family and new real estate, only describing it as "the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). In Exodus, the Israelites are told they would be freed from Egypt and taken to "a land full of milk and honey" (3:17). God leaves out the detail that this will require them to fight the toughest battles of their lives. God tells David, a teenager, that he was next in line to be king. Again, God conveniently leaves out the loss of a best friend and the betrayal of a mentor. Jesus tells a group of fishermen, "Come, follow me... and I'll show you how to fish for people" (Matthew 4:19). He casually leaves out that they will have to fend for their lives. God is never short on dreams but frequently short on details. It's as though we are on a need-to-know basis with God.

Maybe God leaves the dots unconnected for a reason. One reason why we only get glimpses, a dot here and a dot there, is because if God connects the dots too early, there are many experiences that might lead us to prematurely abandon our

dreams and our callings. Imagine if God was honest with Joseph about the road ahead. Joseph's dreams would be fulfilled after he endured years of slavery and imprisonment, after being sold by his own brothers. How do you think Joseph would respond if God mentioned the pits and prisons from the outset? Our faith is barely strong enough to believe the dream, let alone withstand the accompanying details. Many of us would walk away from the very things we have been praying for if we knew all that they entailed. If you saw the complete picture, you might not be able to handle it! Every dream comes with hidden details that are necessary and yet hard to comprehend.

If we really knew how hard relationships really were, would we even give them a chance? Imagine if we were fully aware at the beginning of the difficulties of starting a business, going back to school, starting a new job, dating again, moving again, or joining a church. The road to get there might be too intimidating. The details can be daunting. They can overshadow the possibilities. It's tempting to focus on details and lose sight of God's bigger picture for our lives. The struggles might be overwhelming. If we were aware of every detail, we might have abandoned some of the best things that have ever happened to us.

The ambiguity of our dreams is not meant to confuse, but to protect. God gives us what we can digest in that moment. God loves us enough to give us the amount of information that we can comprehend and act on. The ambiguity and uncertainty in our dreams are not a matter of God's punishment. They are not a sign that we are moving in the wrong direction. And they are certainly not proof that the dream was a sham. *Ambiguity is a decision by a loving God to reveal what our minds can digest without being overwhelmed.*

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This suggests that there will be seasons in your life where you will have to keep moving in the presence of ambiguity. Joseph's life could not wait for clarity. Moving during this time requires a commitment to keep showing up to the places where God has positioned us without knowing how it all connects. It takes the daily practicing of parenting, working, learning, schooling, growing, evolving—not because their meaning is clear, but because it's what we are called to do for this season of our lives.

Unpredictable

There was nothing in Joseph's life that connected to God's bigger picture. There was no present indicator that hinted to the future reality that his dreams revealed. No dot or experience signaled a rise in power or authority for Joseph. There was nothing that indicated the likelihood of people kneeling at his feet. From what we know, Joseph was not part of an internship program that intentionally develops young leaders for future success. There are no discussions around changing the expectations around heirs and birthrights. There has been absolutely no talk about relocating to different lands.

When we perform an inventory of our gifts, we look for signs that we have the skills and abilities necessary to bring our dreams to reality. We are tempted to look for some indication that we have what it takes. If Joseph did this, what would he have seen? I imagine he would have looked around at his experiences and wondered how the present would connect to the bigger picture. How would being one of the youngest, working out in the fields, have led to his family bowing at his feet? God showed Joseph what appeared to be a place of prominence.

The only problem was that there was no path that he could imagine that could take him from his current responsibilities to seeing his dream come to fruition. It's hard for him to truly embrace what he sees because there is no straight line from being out in the fields to having people bow at his feet. That gap between the dots is too great. The present and the picture of the future do not connect.

This is often where faith is lost, and the big picture is questioned. It's in between the dots. When we surrender to the idea, we cannot predict, manipulate, or control how the dots connect. The dots seem as they are—on opposite ends of the page with no points or places of connection. It happens to the best of us. God gives us a glimpse of a bigger picture that reignites our faith. It helps us to uncover passions and dreams that did not previously exist, or that we thought we'd left behind. So, we start searching for indicators. We carefully study the dots in our past. We reflect on the transformative moments in our present. Then we hopefully look at those things that are yet to come and desperately try to discern how they relate. We attempt to draw these neatly ordered lines between our present and the picture of our past. As best we can, we try to chart the course based on the dots that we see.

This is where trust is needed. There are moments in our faith journey when we won't be able to draw a straight line from where we are to where God needs us to be. *Faith is not lived in straight lines.* The dream is not predicated on our ability to know how it will connect. It is frustrating because we are trying to connect the dots we see today as if those are the only available ones for God to use. If it was a picture of future companionship, we would try to draw a straight line from all the viable candidates we currently know. (This can be quite depressing.)

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We anxiously check the current job openings. We stalk the housing markets. We take inventory of all of our connections to determine which of these might open the right door. Our minds run countless scenarios depicting the connections and possibilities. We obsessively look for a viable path that will help bridge the present to God's picture. Similar to Joseph, we realize that none of it makes sense. There is not a direct path. When they don't connect, doubt finds its way into the dream.

The way forward is to trust that God can take what seems totally unconnected, disjointed, or random and find some way for the dream to unfold. There is often so much contradiction in what God shows us and what we see with our own eyes. And yet, it is in the gap that we have to trust that God can connect two contradictory experiences and somehow make them fit. It's embracing a bigger picture even when the dots are not connecting. It's how inexperienced people in the Bible became viable candidates over the more experienced. It's seen in how people with scarred pasts and public failures were expected to do great things. It's how God would ultimately work outside of cultural boundaries, religious expectations, and gender limitations to bring about change. It's when our belief does not waver, even when you see the gaps increase. It's trusting that God can take what appears to be direct contradictions and somehow make them relate.

They Can't See It

Everyone had an opinion about God's dream for Joseph's life. The challenge is not just his ability to embrace what he can't fully understand, but how he responds based on what he hears from others.

I can see Joseph posting his dreams online, anticipating the notifications of encouragement. He overcomes his nerves of going public and presses "post." He waits for the right time of day to ensure that as many people see his message as possible. Joseph hopes to see the "likes" and words of inspiration. He checks every few minutes to confirm how much the engagement numbers have increased. Maybe it was not the right time to post. Did they change the algorithm again? Perhaps he didn't use the right buzzwords. Maybe it's the wrong platform. Then the responses start to trickle in, and they aren't favorable. Angry emojis. Ridicule, disbelief, people listing all the reasons he can't do it or why he shouldn't.

It's hard when your dreams are met with discouragement. The disbelief hurts. The critics' words sting when they come alive. Questions are raised. Doubts are expressed. The "laughing emoji" is in full use.

The only answer Joseph received was a reminder of the ridiculous nature of this dream. His brothers were not convinced or impressed. I'm sure they reminded him of every reason why it wasn't possible. Listing the name of every older brother in line before him would have ended the discussion. Their culture determined power and authority by one's birth order. His dream would have been more believable if it maybe insinuated the death of his brothers and Joseph being the designated survivor. That would make for a better story line and discussion, but of course it wouldn't have made the brothers more receptive to it.

I've learned that there are some seasons where the prayer is not "God, help me to understand it," but instead "God, help me to deal with the responses when the dream becomes public." Some of us can handle the ambiguity, but the absurdity of the

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dream invites the solicited and unsolicited opinions of others. This is what gives us pause and raises second thoughts. It blurs the lines of connection and makes us doubt our glimpses of this bigger picture. God-given dreams will always be accompanied by an array of judgments. They will come from afar and from those who are close.

Joseph's brothers can't see it and are vocal about their disbelief. Joseph learns that proximity does not always yield the same perspective. It's fascinating because he sees them every day. They work together. They eat together. They travel together. They live together. One would logically assume that they would be able to "see" together. And yet, this does not change their perspective.

We see this in our own lives quite often. Many of you have wondered why the people in your home or your own family can have such different political perspectives. It has either been the cause of heavy disagreements or an agreed-upon off-limit topic. It shocks our system because the assumption is that people in close proximity should share the same perspective. But they don't. People we're close to can share different spending habits, express love differently, have different hobbies, and even hold different ideas about faith. Coworkers have different aspirations and ambitions. Even the best of friends can argue about their views on vaccinations and mask-wearing. People in close proximity can and will have vastly different dreams.

Joseph's brothers, the ones who hated him, could not see God's bigger picture. Imagine being one of his brothers. Their words and disbelief were directed at Joseph, but they say something about the brothers themselves. Disbelief was an admission of their limitations. Had they ever seen themselves bowing to Joseph? Probably not. Had they ever received a

dream that they would be in a position of power? I'm not sure. They never imagined they could live outside their cultural limitations. They could not see beyond their own faith or their birth order. They could not imagine life beyond the fields. If they couldn't see it for themselves, they certainly couldn't see it for Joseph. To affirm Joseph's dream would be to affirm that something different is possible. That was something they could not embrace. And it's hard for people to see in you what they have never seen for themselves.

Love and Belief

If there was anyone who could comfort him, it was Joseph's father. Jacob loved Joseph. His father was not ashamed to say it or show it. Everyone knew that Joseph was Jacob's favorite. He had the coat and the gifts to prove it—which contributed to the brothers' anger toward him. His father's love was something that Joseph never doubted. If anyone in that community could see and affirm what God was showing Joseph, it would be his father.

Not only could his father affirm him, he also could understand Joseph. His father's life was an example of living outside of cultural expectations. Maybe Jacob forgot this part of his story. Considering the details of his upbringing, Joseph's dreams shouldn't have seemed too far-fetched to Jacob.

Jacob was the younger of a set of twins and carried the family tradition of being favored by one of his parents. It was prophesied before their birth that the older would serve the younger (Genesis 25:23). As the two grew in age, the dots started to connect. Through lies and deceit, Jacob tricked his older brother Esau into relinquishing his birthright as the

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firstborn son. That was only the start of the downward spiral. As his father lay on his deathbed, Jacob and his mother devised another plot to steal the blessing that belonged to Esau (Genesis 27). For years, this tore the family apart. The inheritance should have been given to his older brother, Esau. The land they were currently living in should have been given to the older son, and with it, God's promise of descendants and blessing first given to Abraham. However, that's not how this story unfolds. While the details of Jacob's ascent are morally questionable, the reality is undeniable. Jacob is a living testament that none of us is bound by cultural limitations.

If there was any chance of someone seeing and understanding God's dream for Joseph, his father was his last hope. But even with a parent's favor and similar story of his own, Jacob couldn't see it either. It's a helpful reminder that everyone who loves you won't always believe in you.

***Love and belief
are not synonymous.***

Love and belief are not synonymous. While love is often an expression of the heart, belief is an exercise of the mind. We make a grave mistake if we assume the two always work in tandem. While they can, they sometimes don't. Our hearts are broken, and our spirits are crushed when we desperately search for belief from the people who openly express their love. We question the validity of our dreams when the lack of support comes from unexpected places. We are even tempted

to reevaluate the extent of their love. We can deal with the disbelief from jealous brothers, but few of us anticipate this response from places of love.

It hurts when disbelief comes from people whom we've known for years, people who know our secrets, and people who have celebrated key milestones in our lives. It hurts when those who know us best can't see it in us or for us. They are friends. They are spouses. They are mentors and coworkers. They are parents. They are teachers. They are loving people. They are caring people who can't see it. It almost seems contradictory. Have there been times in your life where disbelief came from unexpected places?

Love and belief are not synonymous. Those who love us may not always believe our dreams. But the opposite is also true. The absence of belief does not negate the presence of love. You will encounter individuals who love you but can't be the early adopters to the dreams that God has given to you. It means you can't remove everyone from your life who will not support every idea that you express. This does not give them a license to spread their disbelief. Nor does it give them permission to be an obstacle. It just leaves room for their belief to catch up to their love. Sometimes it's personal, and other times it's not. Remember, it's hard for people to see the possibilities beyond their own experience. They can't believe in you what they don't believe is possible in themselves. It could be that your dream pushes their faith to the point of disbelief. Perhaps they might believe in you if you come with a dream that fits the size of their faith. They would be encouraging if you shrunk the size of the dream to fit in a smaller box. Maybe if you had more details. Maybe if your dream depicted them in a better light.

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And let's be honest, there are times when we are asking for people to have blind faith. Here's a hard question: "Have you done enough to earn people's belief?" People love us unconditionally, but belief is earned over time. It is the result of being committed to a particular behavior or outcome over time. I kept hearing this message in my reels online, and thought it appropriate to our response when we find ourselves dreaming alone:

Here's the truth: This is the reality, okay. Nobody is going to believe in you until you've already done it. Nobody is going to come and celebrate with you until you've already done it. The work is going to come before the belief. Which means you're going to have to work for a long...time, by yourself, with no applause, with no awards, with nobody telling you good job.²

There are times when you might be the only one who believes. We must resist the urge to simply dream at a level that won't disappoint others or bring unwanted criticism. So, you will have to keep going back and forth to the fields, make the drive every day to the office, show up to the classroom, or keep the home in order while being the only one who still sees the possibilities. This is not about trying to change the responses of others or even persuade the crowds that are the closest. It's not always about helping others see what they can't. Remember this was a dream not for his father, not for his brother, but it was given to Joseph. It is about how we respond to God's dream for our lives. Even when no one else can see it, will we believe it? Do you believe it? Do you still believe that God has a bigger picture for your life? Do you believe it, even if you can't fully see it at this moment?

SEEING GOD'S DREAM FOR YOUR LIFE

Life can often feel like a scattering of random events. The various choices, opportunities, or even pain we experience seem to have no real purpose or connection. But if we pay attention to God's work, our lives tell a different story.

The story of Joseph in Genesis teaches us to look for the big picture in our lives. It shows us how God weaves what seems random into a beautiful image of joy, survival, purpose, and meaning. In *The Big Picture: Seeing God's Dream for Your Life*, authors Jevon and Nicole Caldwell-Gross take a closer look at the life of Joseph to discover God's presence in moments of triumph and trauma. Join them for this five-week study and see God's dream for your life as you begin connecting the dots of God's grace, presence, and protection.



The Rev. Dr. Jevon Caldwell-Gross serves as the teaching and online pastor at St. Luke's United Methodist Church. As a pastor, author, and professor, his mission is and has always been to equip churches and congregational leaders for relevant and effective ministry in a rapidly changing society.



Rev. Nicole Caldwell-Gross is a gospel storyteller, pastor, and podcaster. She has served as an associate pastor and denominational leader and currently serves as senior pastor of Noblesville First UMC. While God's call has led her to Dubai, India, South Africa, and Cuba, her most meaningful mission field is in Indiana where she and Jevon are outnumbered by their three children.

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