

Divine visions? (Acts 16:9-15)

Dominant Western cultures tend to downplay the significance of dreams. The Bible does not.

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The phone rang in the middle of the night. My grandmother had dreamed that her second-eldest son—who had left for a trip to the mountains on the previous day—lay trapped beneath his car, unable to get out. He was calling for help.

Her panic rising, Grandmother described details from the dream: a curving gravel road, a shallow ravine, her son in trouble. She begged my father to leave immediately to look for him in the mountains where he had been camping.

Dad and his brother had hiked those ridges many times, and they knew the area well. Unsure whether there was a genuine emergency or if the dream was a result of my grandmother's anxiety, my father set off to find out.

Several hours later he located his brother's jeep lying upside down alongside a little-used forest service road, just as my grandmother had described. My uncle was trapped inside. He would have died there had he not been found.

Was that dream the result of a mother's intuition? Merely a coincidence? Or was it a gift from God? It is impossible to know for sure. Plenty of dreams have turned out to be little more than the brain sorting out events of a day. Plenty of people have not received a dream when a loved one is in danger, and God certainly cares for them as much as for my grandmother and uncle.

In any case, dominant Western cultures tend to downplay the significance of dreams, even as the Bible suggests they are one way to show that the Spirit of God is at work in the world.

Biblical writers often mention dreams and visions as signs from God that lead to life. They invite people to respond in faith. Extensive narratives in the Old Testament, for example, portray both Joseph and Daniel as important interpreters of dreams.

As the book of Acts narrates the expansion of the church's mission, dreams and visions serve as evidence that the Holy Spirit is active in the church. When Paul reports on a night-time vision of a man pleading with him to "come to Macedonia and help us," there is no hesitation. Paul and his companions immediately set out for that region.

That dream changes the course of Paul's ministry, even as it changes the lives of Lydia and the other women he encounters at Philippi when they hear the good news about Jesus.

How many people today have altered the course of their life or ministry as a result of a dream? Perhaps more than we know.

One of my friends, a pastor, asked a Bible study group whether any of them had ever had a dream that they thought was from God or was more than "just a dream."

People looked around a little awkwardly as approximately half the hands in the room slowly went up. A few more hands rose when people saw they were not alone.

The pastor then asked how many had ever talked about those dreams with their pastor or with people they knew from church. Almost every hand went down.

Perhaps it is time to explore whether and how the Spirit of God may be at work in the dreams of our people.