

SCRIPTURE & WELLBEING

1 In your dreams

Today we're exploring dreams and how God spoke to different people in the Bible through dreams, with a focus on King Solomon seeking wisdom.

Pray

'God of truth, who speaks in all manner of ways, help me to hear and help me to listen.'

Scripture

The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night.

1 Kings 3:5



L - Sanctuary of Asclepius, Epidaurus © University of Warwick.
R - Statue of Asclepius. 2nd century AD.



Pentelic marble.

Accession number: 263. National Archaeological Museum of Athens. Athens, Greece.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_Asclepius_\(2\).2nd_cent.A.D.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_Asclepius_(2).2nd_cent.A.D.jpg)

The god Asclepius leans on a staff, around which his sacred snake is coiled. The snake is one of the most widely recognised medical and health care symbols in the world and features on the flag of the World Health Organisation. The snake-entwined staff symbol is known as the 'Rod of Asclepius'. It originates from the Greek god of healing, Asclepius, who is mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad* (c.8th c. BC), and whose cult developed from c.6th c. BC. Statues of this god appear from at least 4th c. BC which show him holding a rod with a snake coiled around it. But it has an interesting parallel in the Book of Numbers when Moses is trying to placate the hungry and disillusioned Israelites:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. *Numbers 21:8–9*

The Israelites were initially hesitant, since God had sent fiery serpents as a punishment among the people before, so why would this 'trick' be anything less than terrifying for them?

Reflection

Two and a half millennia before Sigmund Freud, the pioneer of modern psychology, began to explore dreams as pathways to the healing of the soul, ancient Greeks seeking relief from disease made their way to a temple of Asclepius. There they waited to fall asleep, hoping to be cured by the god as he entered their dreams.

Modern science has managed to cast some light on how dreams transport us from one level of consciousness to another. Deep sleep switches off conscious body control, leaving us effectively paralysed, while other parts of the brain are active and cause us to dream. Our eyes begin to dart around and the moment they stop, we forget what we've just been dreaming about. The only way of remembering is to wake up during a phase of rapid eye movement.

So, in a sense neuroscience confirms Freud's suggestion that the brain operates at more than one level of consciousness. But was he right to suggest that those levels are connected by dreams?

On the one hand, they help us to process recent or distant experiences and emotions. But is that all, or are the bizarre images and 'video clips' made in dreamland actual messages, transmitted from unconscious to conscious? Encrypted truths which our conscious was successfully avoiding, while we were awake? When all our busy daytime consciousness cares about is 'what', 'where', 'when' and 'how', is the job of the unconscious to ask 'why'?

Scripture throws a distinctive extra into this speculative mix: enter the God who speaks. Dr Freud focussed on the healing power of dreams. The Bible is less concerned with the dream phenomenon itself, than the one who fills it with meaning. The message no longer solely comes from the natural force of the unconscious, but from the One who transcends nature.

As God enters the world of the dreamer, he alerts and on occasion personally addresses them. Jacob, the ancient patriarch from whom Israel derives its name, dreams of a stairway to heaven. His son Joseph dreams of being favoured above his brothers. The three Magi dream about God telling them not to return to King Herod. How might things have turned out if any of those divine messages, transmitted via the unconscious, had been ignored?

Now, let's move on to explore one dream in particular and look at it in the context of our subject of wellbeing.

Ancient Israel's most iconic king is undoubtedly David. But his son, Solomon, is a close second: proverbial wisdom paired with prodigious splendour and wealth at the cost of mass organised slave labour make him a complex character. Notwithstanding, God asks Solomon in a dream: 'What would you like me to give you?'

It's a strange question. Solomon is the new king of Israel. He's just got married. His father-in-law is none other than the ruler of the ancient superpower that is Egypt. What else could he want?

'What would you like me to give you?' Is God essentially asking: you're king now, but what makes a good king? You have your life ahead of you, but what will it take to be able to look back at a life lived well? It sounds remarkably like the kind of question the unconscious would ask the conscious.

God picks night-time, waiting for Solomon to call it a day, turn in and switch to 'unconscious' mode. 'What would you like me to give you?' Solomon cleverly gets the message. Taking God up on his offer, the unbelievably wealthy, recently wedded, politically astute king of Israel asks for something that money, sex and power can't buy: the wisdom to make the right decisions.

'You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart towards you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.'

1 Kings 3:6–7

Solomon's dream draws him towards the big picture: God made a covenant with his father David and the people of Israel, designed to last to the end of time. Solomon realises the weight of his office, which goes far beyond that of ordinary political rule. His kingship is bound up in a mutual covenant not just between royal and subjects, but the ruler of the universe. No wonder he feels out of his depth.

Solomon's dream also alerts him to his own limitations – his youth and inexperience – which the outward success of enthronement and a strategic alliance with Egypt might easily have led him to forget.

And finally, Solomon is forced to ask what he desires more than anything else. A dream opens the door from the busy sphere of the ego, to the quiet place of true selfhood.

The moral of the story? There is no true wellbeing unless we follow Solomon's example and:

- ... acknowledge our limitations
- ... confront our insecurities and fears
- ... ask how we shall live well
- ... realise our dependence on God
- ... and answer life's fundamental questions.

On the surface, we may feel we're doing fine and even be proud of our achievements. And yet, there could be questions, lingering deep down, resurfacing every once in a while, perhaps in a dream: Is this it? What do I want? What is expected of me? Who am I, deep down?

When Solomon found the answer, we read that God was pleased.

Pray

*God of wisdom, whether I'm awake or dreaming, help me to quieten down and hear your voice. Give me the insight to tell what is right, helpful and life-giving from that which is damaging and keeping me from truly becoming the person you want me to be.
Amen.*

Reflection and action

If it's a sunny day, take a walk while doing this activity. If it's raining or too cold, then choose a comfortable place to sit quietly. Ponder these questions without rushing or feeling pressurised:

If God asked me 'What would you like me to give you?' what would my answer be?
What might be the unconscious motivation behind my answer?
Is it the only answer I could give?

In the coming days, try to listen to your dreams and ask what they might be telling, or indeed asking you.

More importantly still, try to stay tuned to the voice of God as you go through the day and be ready to experience his revealing, healing presence. You might find that God has more to say to you over the next week, so don't feel frustrated or disheartened if it's not that clear yet. Let God's words emerge slowly.

Reflection on the painting



The Dream of Solomon by Luca Giordano, c.1693–95.

Oil on Canvas. Museo del Prado.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luca_Giordano_-_Dream_of_Solomon_-_WGA09004.jpg

This is the moment that God gives Solomon his wisdom in a dream. It is the act of conveying something invisible within the visible domain while still asleep. This painting is sumptuous in style in order to convey the drama of this event and is full of allegorical qualities. God shines the light of wisdom onto Solomon with his up-tilted chin, and provides a vision of what will be Solomon's temple to the right. The Temple would hold the Ark of the Covenant and stand for 410 years before being destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar II.

Above Solomon at the top right is Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, who will inspire Solomon in his judgements. Minerva is also the goddess of music, poetry, medicine, crafts, weaving, magic and warfare. She represents a pre-Christian figure here with the owl of wisdom perched above her head. At her side is a lamb and a book, representing the later arrival of Jesus – the Lamb of God, and the holy book – the Bible. Minerva is predicting the fulfilment of the law through Jesus while two men in the bottom left invite us to be silent.

The ornate bed upon which Solomon sleeps with its golden headboard carved as a faun on which his crown rests (in submission to God), alludes to the fact that fauns unconsciously imparted wisdom – another pre-Christian echo. The muted colours, billowing clouds and organic brushstrokes all emphasise the dreamy mood of this episode. Our artist is portraying a window onto a subconscious state through the veil of the divine. God enters earth in the darkest hour and shines his light upon the king.

Solomon is classically beautiful, supine and vulnerable. There is no cowering in fear; rather an openness to what he receives, and an intensity in knowing that he has absolutely no control over this spirit-led experience. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* as Proverbs 9:10 reminds us all.

Solomon's dream

Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David, until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem. The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord.

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt-offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask what I should give you.' And Solomon said, 'You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart towards you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?'

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, 'Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.'

Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem, where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. He offered up burnt-offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

Bible texts for further reflection**Jacob's ladder****Joseph's dreams****The Magi's dream****Mindfulness at the feet of Jesus with Mary and Martha****Genesis 28:10–17****Genesis 37:1–11****Matthew 2:1–12****Luke 10:38–42****Further reading**

Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World by John O'Donohue, Bantam Books, 1999.

Dream Work by Mary Oliver, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994. (A collection of poems).

Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future by Pope Francis and Austen Ivereigh, Simon & Schuster, 2020.