

# IT'S NOT OVER



*Leaving Behind Disappointment  
and Learning to Dream Again*

**JOSHUA GAGNON**

*Foreword by* MARK BATTERSON

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*Jennifer, you are the most amazing woman I've ever known, and being able to call you my wife is proof that dreams come true. You are the purest example of a Jesus follower I've ever met, and I am a better me because I am with you. I love you always and forever.*

*Malachi and Nehemiah, never settle for a life of mediocrity. Instead, chase dreams that are God-sized. If I could line up all the boys in the whole world and only choose two, I would choose you every time. Words will always fall short of describing my love for you, but here's my best attempt: I love you.*

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# INTRODUCTION

## *A Great, Big, Beautiful Tomorrow*

All our dreams can come true, if we have the courage to pursue them.

—WALT DISNEY<sup>1</sup>

“You know this is proof, right?”

I was at Disney World, speaking to my wife, Jennifer, as we waited in line for one of the popular rides. I don’t remember which ride, but I do remember it was hot. And humid. And crowded. And noisy.

“Oh, yeah?” Jennifer raised her eyebrows as she fanned herself with a park map, trying to create a little breeze. “Proof of what?”

Before I answered, I looked over at our sons, Malachi and Nehemiah. They were reading through one of those informational placards they build into the waiting areas of Disney rides

in an attempt to make the lines less boring. Then I looked back into my wife's eyes, smiled, and said, "Proof that I love you."

We both knew it was true. My love for my family is the *only* thing that motivates me to join them at zoos, fairs, stadiums—and especially at amusement parks. I once waited in line four hours just so my sons could meet Woody and Buzz Lightyear, their heroes from *Toy Story*. Now that's love!

These days, my boys no longer care about meeting larger-than-life characters. Instead, they've become adventure seekers, tackling the likes of Space Mountain, Rock 'n' Roller Coaster, and the Tower of Terror. Jennifer too. I'm not a fan of rides that go faster than five miles an hour, so I spend our days at Disney either sitting on the sidelines or going on what my sons call "old people rides."

One of my favorite old-people rides is the Carousel of Progress, which is a rotating stage show that debuted at the 1964 World's Fair in New York. The carousel takes you on a simulated time-travel experience with animatronic characters from different periods of the twentieth century, each describing how technology has improved their lives.

One of the main features of that ride is a song called "There's a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow," which gets repeated over and over again throughout the experience. The song describes a great big beautiful tomorrow that shines at the end of each day—a tomorrow that's a better version of today. A tomorrow we can access by following both our minds and our hearts.

According to the song, this great big beautiful tomorrow is only a dream away.

I've probably heard that song a hundred times by now, but I still enjoy it. I find the music calming and the lyrics inspiring.



Actually, *enjoy* might not be a strong enough word. The truth is, I get choked up every time I go on that ride. Even now, after all these years, I have to wipe away a few tears as I leave the theater. Yes, it's a bit awkward when I'm surrounded by a bunch of little kids and I look like I just finished watching the movie *Titanic*, but I can't help it. It makes me emotional.

The reason that ride affects me so much is because it's all about the power dreams have to shape our lives—to influence both who we are and what we can become.

As you get to know me throughout this book, you'll see that I'm passionate about dreams. In fact, I believe that pursuing a dream is essential to living a life with purpose. It's as vital to life as eating is to nourishment and breathing is to consciousness. This is especially true of God-sized dreams, which are those burning desires we often bury deep in our hearts because it seems as if there's *no way* we can accomplish them—at least, not through our own wisdom and strength.

I know firsthand how amazing it feels to achieve that kind of dream. It's life-changing in so many ways! But I also know what it's like to carry the disappointment and despair of watching a treasured dream slowly wither over time and feeling like there's nothing you can do to stop it from dying completely.

But here's the good news: nobody needs to keep carrying that disappointment or continue living in that despair. There's a better way.

## A DREAM COME TRUE

Years ago, I had a dream of starting a church. Specifically, I wanted to launch a church for people who didn't enjoy or

feel comfortable in what we think of as a “traditional” church experience. I wanted to be part of a community where people didn’t have to pretend all the time—where we could be real.

Growing up, and even into adulthood, the churches I attended often failed to deal with the issues that were important to regular people. I noticed that my friends associated the church with holding picket signs rather than sharing the love of Jesus. And as I looked around, it felt as if many of the Christians I knew cared more about what folks wore to church and whether they had the right opinions than about being real and allowing Jesus to meet them where they were at.

I wanted to see a church that was relevant and life-giving. A place that made sense in today’s culture—one that actually loved the community around it. A place that helped people experience life and joy and peace instead of guilt and disappointment.

Basically, I wanted a place where I could serve Jesus and still be myself.

In 2008, my wife and I officially launched Next Level Church in Dover, New Hampshire. We had no money. We had no congregation. And we had no experience as church planters. At that time, we didn’t even realize we were trying to plant a church in the least-churched region of the United States.

All we had was the dream.

Today, Next Level Church is one of the fastest-growing congregations in the world, with nine locations spread across several different states. I don’t say that because I’m prideful about the growth or because I want you to think of me as a success. No, I say that because I’m so excited that my dream is coming true! There have been many obstacles along the

way—we still face some today—and there have definitely been times when I've felt like everything was about to come crashing down. And yet, each day when I go to work, I feel like a kid on Christmas morning who somehow got exactly what he wanted with every single gift.

It's an incredible feeling, and it's one I want to share. In fact, one of my primary goals as a pastor is leading the members of my community to not only identify their God-sized dreams but also to take action toward achieving them. Along the same lines, I love getting the chance to speak with those who are longing so desperately to break free from the disappointments of yesterday and take hold of the hope found in tomorrow. Let me tell you, when I get the privilege of walking alongside people who finally—finally!—get to realize a dream or let go of a burden that's been dragging them down toward despair, it's an amazing experience.

Of course, within my role as a pastor, I also engage with many people on the other side of the fence. Meaning, as I interact with those in my community—and now even as I travel around the country and around the world—I regularly encounter people who have been carrying their disappointment for so long that they've lost the will to dream. These are people whose lives are devoid of hope. People who receive little or nothing from their dreams today and who expect nothing more from the future than a dark and discouraging tomorrow.

This isn't an attitude or a lifestyle that develops overnight. It takes a lot of time and a lot of disappointment. I see it in people who dreamed of getting married but have given up after years of looking for love and never finding it. I also see it in those who dreamed of having their marriages restored but

gave up after a decade with no change. I see it in those who dreamed of victory over destructive habits but have settled into a crippling addiction after failing again and again. It's in those who have been believing God faithfully for an answer to prayer but are beginning to lose faith. And I see it in those who started life with a compelling vision of their purpose and what they would achieve but who are simply tired of constantly falling short.

And it's obvious that the world doesn't help. Society, with all its expectations, doesn't help. I know people who have been told again and again that their best days are behind them. That they're too old, that they've failed too often, and that they're not smart enough or spiritual enough or talented enough or \_\_\_\_\_ enough to achieve their dreams.

These are false narratives, and we often know them to be false—at first. But when we hear them over and over again and constantly feel the weight of dreams that have yet to be realized, those narratives begin to take root in our hearts.

If you can relate to any of these ideas, or if you're carrying the weight of disappointment even now, please keep reading. Because you really can learn to dream again. I'm living proof that it's possible!

## DON'T SETTLE FOR MEDIOCRE

This book almost didn't happen, and it's not because I didn't want to write it. Actually, it's been a dream of mine to write for many years. No, this book almost didn't happen because I almost allowed disappointment to kill that dream. Almost.

Several years ago, I put together a book proposal and went through the process of seeking a publisher. It was tough and terrifying, which I've now learned is common for most first-time authors. I had people who helped me, and they did everything possible to land me a book deal. But in the end, each of our leads dried up.

One of the publishers actually included a personal note in the rejection letter that said, "Josh isn't a gifted writer."

I'll be honest: that was a punch to the gut. It hurt. And because it hurt, I closed the door on my dream of writing a book. In fact, the morning after I received that letter, I told God during a time of prayer that I was giving up—that I would never write a book. I also expressed how angry and upset I was that He had closed the door so completely on a dream I thought had come from Him.

In the months that followed, several people asked me about writing. That's common when you lead a church that grows beyond a certain size. But every time someone mentioned the idea, I changed the subject. I wouldn't even consider it. As far as I was concerned, the dream was dead.

Then, almost a year to the day I had received that note from a publisher, a literary agent contacted me out of the blue. He said I'd been recommended by several people he trusted, and after researching me and listening to several of my sermons, he wanted to know if I had any interest in writing a book.

You know what I did? Nothing. I didn't even respond.

Looking back, I think I was aware that my dream wasn't dead but merely sleeping. Yet because of the pain and disappointment I still carried, I didn't want to wake it up. Rejection

is a painful thing. So I told myself, *I'm not a gifted writer*, and I tried to ignore what God was doing.

But that's the thing about God-sized dreams: they don't give up. They keep burning, even when we do everything in our power to stuff them down and snuff the flame to ashes. I couldn't ignore the idea that this book really could be a blessing to people—that what I had to share could help people let go of disappointment and start dreaming and living a life of hope again.

THAT'S THE THING  
ABOUT GOD-SIZED  
DREAMS: THEY  
DON'T GIVE UP.



Almost a full year after I heard from that agent, I finally wrote him back. “I can’t shake this passion inside me,” I said. “I want to give it another try.”

The fact that you are reading these pages tells you the end of the story. But as you continue to read, I hope you’ll remember that I understand the weight of disappointment. I know what it’s like to feel crushed by dreams that never seem to come true. I know what it feels like to be rejected, to feel inadequate, and to begin praying small, safe prayers because big, bold ones often carry the risk of large disappointment.

At the same time, I’ve learned again and again that even when it feels like it’s over, it’s not over!

What about you? I don’t know your story, but I bet there was a time when you had dreams that took your breath away. You prayed they would come true, chased after them relentlessly, and turned over every rock that stood in the way. Is that dream still alive? Is it sleeping? Or have you settled for a simplified version of what you once desired?

Whatever your situation, it's not too late. There's still time to break free from the mundane and the mediocre. You don't have to live in the shadows of yesterday. You don't have to keep carrying the pain of your failures. You don't have to settle for safe prayers that take little or no faith. No! You still have a chance to chase after your God-sized dreams and your God-given future. And I would love the privilege of walking alongside you as you get started.

To accomplish that, we'll start by gaining a firm understanding of what God-sized dreams are and how to recognize them in our lives. Next, we'll take a head-on look at the obstacles that often derail our dreams, including disappointment, discontentment, and resistance from outside sources. Finally, we'll walk through several ways—both practical and spiritual—to overcome those obstacles and start dreaming again.

As we work through these pages together, I believe God will revive dead goals, breathe new life into dormant hopes, and birth brand-new dreams—for you and for me.

**PURSUING  
A DREAM IS  
ESSENTIAL TO  
LIVING A LIFE  
WITH PURPOSE.**





*one*



## SWEET DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS

There is no use in running before you are sent; there is no use in attempting to do God's work without God's power. A man working without this unction, a man working without this anointing, a man working without the Holy Ghost upon him, is losing time after all.

—D. L. MOODY<sup>1</sup>

I happen to be a sucker for KFC commercials. I don't know why, but when I see slow-motion images of that crispy, juicy, golden-brown chicken piled high in those red-and-white buckets, and then those flakey biscuits with the thick country gravy, I have to remember to close my mouth to make sure I'm not drooling.

Maybe you're too healthy to be a fried-chicken fan. In that's the case, I don't understand you, and I'm a little sad for

you and jealous of you at the same time. But you still might be interested to know that KFC is the culmination of a lifelong dream—one that almost died before it even really got started.

Harland Sanders was born in 1890 and grew up on an Indiana farm. His father passed away when he was six years old, which meant Harland's mother had to go to work at a local canning factory to support her family. It also meant Harland himself became the primary caretaker for his younger siblings—which included cooking the family meals.

After leaving home, Sanders went on a bit of journey to find himself. He worked as a streetcar conductor, served in the army, worked as a fireman for railroad companies, studied and practiced law, sold insurance, manufactured acetylene-lighting systems for farmers, sold tires, and more. In the middle of all that, he got married and had three children.

Motivating Sanders through each turn in his career path was a burning desire to provide a legacy for his family. Always a bit of a showman, he wanted to accomplish something big. Something memorable.

Finally, Sanders settled down in a little town called Corbin, Kentucky, where he ran a combination hotel and service station. To make some extra money, he started offering meals to weary travelers—homecooked food for those who were tired of eating at greasy spoons. And wouldn't you know, they loved it! In fact, they couldn't get enough of it. Word spread up and down the highway that Sanders's food was too good to pass up. Soon, Sanders abandoned the service station entirely and instead built a restaurant, which could seat 142 people.

And then disaster struck. After ten years of increasing success, the government constructed a new interstate that

completely bypassed Corbin, Kentucky—which meant there were no more customers for Harland Sanders. Dejected, he auctioned off the restaurant and its property in 1956. The sale price barely covered his debts and left him with little money and even less hope for the future.<sup>2</sup>

That's the moment when Sanders could have given up. That's the moment when his dream was closest to dying. After all, he was sixty-six years old and broke. What hope did he have for doing something big? Something memorable? Something to provide a legacy for his family?

In my experience, that's the moment when dreams die for so many people. When a crisis hits, when they don't understand how they can possibly move forward, most people respond by giving up. Or they settle for something smaller—something easier. And their dreams are buried in what-ifs and thoughts of what might have been.

Fortunately for fried-chicken fans everywhere, that's not how Harland Sanders responded. He was certain of one thing: he could make finger-lickin' good fried chicken. So, he jumped into his 1946 Ford and hit the road.

Starting in Salt Lake City, Utah, Sanders began making deals with restaurant owners. His sales pitch was simple: if they gave him a nickel for every piece of fried chicken they sold, he would teach them how to prepare his secret recipe of eleven herbs and spices. He even spent days at each restaurant (and nights in the back of his car) preparing food for customers and showing chefs how to cook it perfectly every time. Sanders also required each restaurant that sold his chicken to display a large sign with his copyrighted logo and these words: **FEATURING COLONEL SANDERS' RECIPE KENTUCKY FRIED CHICKEN.**

By 1963, there were over six hundred restaurants that sold Sanders's chicken and displayed his sign. In 1964, he sold the business for \$2 million, and he negotiated a further salary of \$250,000 per year to serve as the primary face and spokesman for Kentucky Fried Chicken until the end of his life.<sup>3</sup>

How's that for a dream come true?

## DEFINING A GOD-SIZED DREAM

Maybe right now you're thinking, *You're a pastor, so aren't you supposed to talk about spiritual things? And isn't this book supposed to help me pursue the kinds of dreams that will help me find fulfillment and purpose in my life? Why are you talking about fried chicken?*

Good questions. The answer to the first question is that Harland Sanders was both a fried-chicken entrepreneur *and* a follower of God. In fact, he was made an honorary colonel by the governor of Kentucky in 1935 because of his humanitarian work and community service—that's how he became "Colonel Sanders"!

The answer to the second question is that Colonel Sanders did live a life of purpose and fulfillment. He was a simple man at heart who spent little and donated the vast majority of his fortune to charities, including helping to found and support several children's hospitals. Meaning, his dream of crafting and selling the world's best fried chicken has literally saved lives. Even now, decades after the Colonel passed away, his pursuit of that dream is still saving lives.

Think about that the next time you gobble down some KFC! (Or a salad at the restaurant next door.)

All joking aside, the main reason I'm sharing these details is because Colonel Sanders's story is a great illustration of what I often refer to as a "God-sized dream."

To put it simply, a God-sized dream is a compelling vision, goal, or longing that drives us toward something way too big for us to accomplish on our own. It's a dream or a yearning we feel inside—usually it's something that we deeply desire to achieve or experience—and yet we often have no idea how to bring it about.

That word *compelling* is important. God-sized dreams are those desires inside us that simply won't be ignored. When we pay attention to them and spend time pursuing them, we feel exhilarated. We feel joy and purpose—like we're doing exactly what we were created to do. On the other hand, when we try to ignore our God-sized dreams or move away from them, it burns. It's like an indigestion of the soul.

For example, I mentioned in the introduction that I caught a vision as a young man to plant a church. More specifically, I wanted to plant a successful church that would serve the needs of people in a real way but would also look and feel different from what I had experienced in churches for most of my life. I wanted to build a new kind

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of community, and I wanted to build it in a place where people generally don't go to church.

That was my God-sized dream, and for years I went back and forth between trying to ignore it and trying to make it happen. I tried to talk myself out of it. I would remind myself of all the reasons it didn't make any sense for me to be a pastor, let alone plant a church: I didn't have the right education, I didn't have any experience, and I'd never been the kind of guy that people looked at and thought, *He's going to do great things for Jesus*.

None of it worked. I wanted to run away from the dream of planting a church so many times, but each time I tried, it kept pulling me back in.

Looking back, I can remember specific times when I chose to ignore the list of reasons and excuses as to why my dream would never become a reality—and in those moments, I always felt so alive! I remember preaching sermons to myself as I drove down the road in my 1998 Ford Bronco. That gas-guzzler was my first pulpit. It's where I first learned to speak from my heart and listen for the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit. It's where I first became burdened for my friends who were far from God. (I think I even led myself to Jesus during one of my steering-wheel altar calls!)

Back in those days, it was just God and me, driving down the road. It was an unforgettable period of my life, and those memories are precious to me. Now I understand that the joy I experienced was a sure and certain sign that I was pursuing a God-sized dream, even though I didn't always recognize it at the time.

Of course, I still had no idea how to start a church—which

is another element that's often true of God-sized dreams: they are beyond us. They typically involve goals or visions that we simply cannot achieve on our own. And that's why we might try to hide them or push them down, because we know we're inadequate to achieve what we so deeply desire, and the awareness of that inadequacy can become painful if we don't use it to turn toward God.

That's a major problem today. So many people have rejected living out their God-sized dreams because they are focused on who *they* are instead of who *God* is. When we remember that God's strength begins where our strength ends, we'll have the freedom to chase after dreams we once thought were impossibilities.

That being the case, I'm thankful God knew exactly what He was doing when He planted that dream inside me to start a church. And I'm thankful I eventually stopped trying to figure things out on my own and chose to allow *Him* to accomplish *His* dream through me.

Don't miss that truth: God-sized dreams come from God. I know that sounds obvious, but it's an important distinction. When I conceive of a dream in my own mind and heart, I can easily squash it if I choose to do so. Because the dream or the goal has its source inside me, I can choose to let it go and stop thinking about it.

God-sized dreams are different because they have their source in God. That makes them harder to ignore. Harder to push aside. Even when we want to forget about them, they keep smoldering in our hearts.

I often share that one of the main reasons I continued to pursue my dream of planting Next Level Church in spite of all

the obstacles and difficulties we encountered is that I knew abandoning that dream would mean disobeying God. There were times I tried to let the dream die, and there were plenty of times when people around me tried to convince me I had no business planting a church. (I'll share more about that later in the book.) But in the end, I couldn't let it go. I was aware that the Creator of the universe had placed this dream inside me, and that awareness kept driving me forward.

That's a God-sized dream.

One last thought: the kind of dream I'm talking about doesn't have to include a specific achievement or goal. A God-sized dream can be much broader, much simpler.

For example, one of my biggest dreams for a long time was simply to find security in my identity and in who Jesus made me to be. For much of my developing years, I always felt this huge sense of inadequacy—I carried a burden of believing I wasn't good enough and that I needed to accomplish something huge in order to feel loved or accepted by others. I longed for the day when I wouldn't feel like I needed to prove myself.

In a similar way, your God-sized dream may be simply to find hope for the future. To overcome the pain and discouragement of the past. To feel stable or content or at peace. That's okay. In fact, I know from experience that those are amazing dreams to pursue!

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOD-SIZED DREAM

Based on what we've explored so far, you may already have a sense of the God-sized dream or dreams that have been



planted in your heart. You may even know exactly what dreams or goals fit into that category: your desire for a spouse, your prayer for a miracle, your longing for children, your goal to start a business, your hope for serving in a specific ministry, your desire for a certain career, your determination to overcome an addiction, and so on.

But I've also found that people can have a lot of confusion about what qualifies as a God-sized dream. After all, we have a lot of desires. It's natural for us to make goals and hope for achievements in different areas. So how do we determine whether a specific dream comes from God or is simply the result of that pizza or KFC we ate before bed last night?

I'd like to answer those questions by introducing one of the Bible's biggest dreamers: Nehemiah. This is one of my favorite Bible moments—in fact, I love it so much I named one of my sons Nehemiah! As we engage with his story, we'll find several characteristics that are often connected with God-sized dreams.

The Old Testament describes how God's people, the Israelites, repeatedly failed to follow Him, instead choosing to worship idols and false gods from other cultures. As a result, God sought new ways to get their attention and repeatedly gave them opportunities to turn back to Him.

Eventually, God implemented some tough love. Around 600 BC, God chose King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians as His instrument to deliver a resounding message to His people. The Babylonian army invaded Israelite territory in three separate waves over a period of about twenty years. The third wave was the worst as the Babylonians killed countless Israelites, demolished their sacred temple in Jerusalem, and

exported thousands of Israelites as slaves back to Babylon. When the invasion was over, Judah had been reduced to ruins, its people broken and scattered.

Nehemiah's ancestors were likely taken into captivity during the first wave of the Babylonian invasion. Meaning, Nehemiah was born in Babylon to exiled parents.

With that background in place, let's take a deeper look at his story.

## God-Sized Dreams Begin with a Need

Here's how Nehemiah introduced himself in Scripture, writing in the first person:

In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem. They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire." (Neh. 1:1–3)

It's important to remember that Nehemiah was born in Babylon, which means he had never seen Jerusalem—but he had surely heard about it. I can imagine the Israelite parents telling their children stories of the towering temple, the beautiful countryside, and the abundance of crops. This was their promised land, after all, the stuff of legends. Nehemiah

would've grown up listening to tales of how God miraculously led His people into Jerusalem, of great battles and enemy defeats, and even more importantly, of God's promise that His people would someday rebuild the temple and occupy Jerusalem again.

Now, imagine the horror and pain in Nehemiah's heart when he heard that the walls and gates of Jerusalem had been destroyed. In the ancient world, a city's walls were its primary means of defense against outside invaders, which meant Jerusalem was basically defenseless and in no condition for rebuilding.

The report from Judah broke something inside Nehemiah. That was the moment he thought, *This is not okay. Something has to be done!* Until that point, Nehemiah had been unaware of the state of Jerusalem's walls, but those words from his brother were the seed God used to spark in his heart the dream of rebuilding.

In a similar way, God-sized dreams are often planted in our hearts when we encounter a specific need. For some people, the sight of a hungry child immediately sparks a fire inside their hearts. For others, the thought of someone being homeless moves them deeply. Maybe the need that moves you is racial injustice, young people walking away from the church, current political issues, sex trafficking, Bible illiteracy, war, cancer, or any of a million other things.

It's also possible for personal longings to become the seed for God-sized dreams: the desire to get married, to witness a miraculous healing, to see your family restored, to launch a business, to break free from addiction, to develop self-confidence, and so on. There are moments when we hear

about the devastation around us and we are driven to dream. But there are also moments when dreams are birthed by the devastation within us.

In short, when God breaks your heart over a specific need, it's often the first sign that God is planting a dream inside you.

As I mentioned earlier, my own dream to launch Next Level Church was sparked by my desire to find a church community I could feel comfortable in—one where I could fit in without feeling like I had to pretend I was someone else. Later, as the dream developed, I also realized there was a deep need for just such a community in the relatively unchurched area of New England, and now God is enlarging the dream to other regions of the country.

## God-Sized Dreams Create Open Doors

While God-sized dreams often begin with our response to a specific need, there are lots of needs in our world. Actually, there are lots of needs in each of our communities. So we need more input when it comes to identifying which needs (and which dreams) God is using to direct our steps.

I like the way Nehemiah responded after his heart was broken by the Jerusalem report: “When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven” (1:4). Notice that Nehemiah didn't rush into action. Instead, he stopped and sought direction from God through prayer and fasting.

In other words, he waited for God to open a door. He waited to see what God was doing and how he could get on board.

And when that door eventually opened, it opened in a huge way:

Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was serving the king his wine. I had never before appeared sad in his presence. So the king asked me, "Why are you looking so sad? You don't look sick to me. You must be deeply troubled."

Then I was terrified, but I replied, "Long live the king! How can I not be sad? For the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."

The king asked, "Well, how can I help you?"

With a prayer to the God of heaven, I replied, "If it please the king, and if you are pleased with me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried." (2:1-5)

The king himself asked Nehemiah how he could help him accomplish his dream! How cool is that? Nehemiah didn't have to knock down doors or try to position himself in God's favor. He stayed faithfully planted where God had placed him, and then God brought the opportunity to him.

As modern people with a "go get 'em" mentality, we spend so much time trying to manipulate our way into greater opportunities. We are often desperate to make things happen. But in a split second God can open doors that we've spent years trying to crack. Remember this: you don't have to force your

way into God's plan; you just need to move in His direction when He opens a door.

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I don't know what door God will open to point you toward your dreams, but you'd better be paying attention when He moves. Imagine if Nehemiah had missed the chance to tell the king what had been stirring within him. *Well, this isn't really an appropriate subject for work . . .* Instead, Nehemiah pounced, and so should we.

Your open door could be a chance encounter with the CEO of the company where you always dreamed of working. Maybe that great guy you see on the subway each day really is worth your time. Maybe it's that college-acceptance letter you received, even though you don't yet know how you'll pay the tuition. Or maybe it's an opportunity to be mentored by someone who can help you find security in your God-given identity, or to go on a mission trip through your church.

You might be thinking, *But how do I know which opportunities are God opening a door, and which are just happenstance? How do I know when to jump?*

Remember what Nehemiah did: as soon as his heart was broken for Jerusalem, he prayed and fasted. Meaning, he turned to God and stayed close to Him. He sought God's direction rather than trying to make his own path, and therefore he was ready when God opened the door. The same can

be true for us when we stay close to God each day and seek direction from His Holy Spirit.

When it comes to finding God's will for your life, your heart matters more than your decisions. What I mean is that God is not up in heaven playing a big game of "pick the correct door." Many people go through life afraid of making decisions—afraid that if they choose wrong, they'll ruin their lives. This results in stagnation. Such people want to move, but their feet are stuck in the quicksand of what-ifs.

I love these words from Proverbs 3:5–6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight" (NIV). Remember this: our God is a good Father, and He's able to *make* our paths straight even if we start down the wrong path.

If we are diligent in seeking God with all our hearts, He is able to bring us where we need to be even when we choose the wrong door—and He's promised He will do it. We don't have to be paralyzed by the fear of wrong decisions; we can live in freedom, knowing that if we seek God as Nehemiah did, He is more than capable of straightening our paths.

You may be asking, *So I can just do whatever I want and God will make my path straight?* Not quite. Remember, God straightens the paths of those who are seeking Him. By definition we cannot seek His will and "do whatever we want" at the same time. When we seek His will and line up our lives with His desires, God will make our paths straight, because He has always cared more about our hearts than our decisions.

My "choose a path" moment came when I was working as a youth pastor, preaching every Wednesday night to students

and also to nursing-home residents. One day when I was teaching at a youth conference, I met a small group of people from a church that had recently shut down; they no longer had a pastor. They were older saints, and I respected them—still do. They told me they saw the hand of God over my life, and they asked if I had ever thought about starting a church.

This may sound silly, but until that moment I had never really considered how churches got started. I had dreamed of being a pastor, but I had no idea what that would look like or what it would take to *start* a church. So I laughed off their suggestion. Yet even in that moment, there was something inside me that jumped at the thought. Pretty soon, I couldn't think of much else. The dream was that strong!

When I later found ten friends who agreed to be part of the launch team with Jen and me, we jumped. And we've been moving forward ever since.

A God-sized dream requires a God-sized opportunity; it also requires the willingness to seek God first and *then* to make a decision. So be patient, be watchful, seek after Him, and be ready to leap through that door when it opens.

## God-Sized Dreams Match Our Abilities and Experience

Let's look back to Nehemiah's story and see what happened after he finally arrived at Jerusalem:

So I arrived in Jerusalem. Three days later, I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me . . .

The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish



leaders—the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration. But now I said to them, “You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!” Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king.

They replied at once, “Yes, let’s rebuild the wall!” So they began the good work. (2:11–12, 16–18)

In the book of Nehemiah, his leadership stands out. You can see it in these verses as he secretly inspected the wall by night and then rallied the people of the city to join his cause. “Let us . . . end this disgrace!” By the time he finished his speech, all the people were champing at the bit to begin their “good work.”

I’m not surprised at Nehemiah’s leadership effectiveness because of where his story began. Do you remember what he was doing in Babylon? He was the cupbearer to the king. That meant he sampled all the king’s food and drink to check for poison, which obviously was an important job. That also meant Nehemiah was one of the king’s key advisors. He was someone the king trusted.

Therefore, Nehemiah must have been a natural leader. Even as a foreigner, he was able to rise through the ranks and become a key administrator in the Babylonian kingdom.

When it came to rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem, Nehemiah obviously needed to recruit some help. He needed expert builders, skilled artisans, strong men to haul stones, guards to stand watch, and carpenters to build the gates and doors. Though all of this special talent was crucial, the dream

required Nehemiah's unique leadership ability most of all. God assigned Nehemiah the critical role of leading the project, but He also uniquely equipped him with the leadership ability to achieve it.

In a similar way, God-sized dreams typically align well with our abilities and life experiences. That's why we often find fulfillment and purpose when we pursue those dreams—we are doing exactly what God uniquely created us to do.

So what are you good at? What comes easily to you? Are you good at working with your hands? Do you like math? Do you enjoy speaking in public? Are you a natural leader? Do you love to write? Do you enjoy initiating things? Do you love animals? Do you love kids? Do you enjoy teaching?

Don't overcomplicate it. God's will for your life will typically align with your divine giftedness. Ask yourself, *Is that what's happening in my life right now? In my career? In my ministry opportunities? Am I being given opportunities to use my greatest gifts?*

Now, I say "typically" because there are times when God may ask you to jump into something new. In my life, for example, I had no pastoral experience before we launched Next Level Church. No official training. There was a big learning curve for me. Looking back, however, I can say with confidence that God designed me to be a pastor. That includes how much I enjoy teaching, my love for people, and my ability to lead—all of those and more are part of who I am and who I've always been. It just took me a little while to realize it.

God made each person specifically and uniquely. Even identical twins have distinct interests, desires, and abilities. This is all by design. God chose a unique dream just for you

and shaped you with the exact experiences, skills, and abilities you need to accomplish it. He does not intend for your unique talents to go to waste!

## God-Sized Dreams Create Opposition

I hated elementary school for a lot of reasons, but one of the biggest (literally and figuratively) was a bully named Billy. Every day, from the moment I got on the bus to the moment I finally got back off, he picked on me. He would hit me, call me names, and try to embarrass me in every way imaginable. (Billy, if you're reading this, I'm still afraid of you!)

I finally told my mom about Billy one day after school. She was pretty upset, but I begged her not to say anything to the principal. Instinctively, I knew that would only make things worse. To my surprise, my mom agreed. In hindsight, I should have realized that was too easy.

The next day, Mom walked me to the bus as usual—but then she kept going. She went right through the doors, up the little stairs, and yelled out, “Who’s Billy?”

Billy wasn’t a dummy. He cowered down in his seat and didn’t say a word. He didn’t succeed in hiding, though, because the rest of the kids on the bus were all pointing at him in unison.

My mom marched up to his seat and spoke in a voice of cold fury. “If you are ever mean to Joshua again, you will have to deal with me!” Needless to say, I never had a problem with Billy or any other bullies in elementary school. Word got around.

I mention that story because I know for many people, it’s easy to think that when God plants a dream in your heart, it’s smooth sailing from that moment on. Nope! That’s not the case at all. In fact, pursuing a God-sized dream almost

always involves a lot of obstacles and opposition. Why is that? Because evil really does exist in the world, and we really do have an Enemy—a bully worse than a thousand Billys—who is actively seeking to derail God's plan for our lives. This is especially true when it comes to chasing our God-given, God-inspired dreams.

Look at what Nehemiah experienced, for example:

But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites heard that the work was going ahead and that the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem were being repaired, they were furious. They all made plans to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw us into confusion. But we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night to protect ourselves. (4:7–9)

Israel's enemies were not happy about the walls around Jerusalem being rebuilt. They preferred to keep Jerusalem a defenseless ruin, so they did everything they could to hinder and halt Nehemiah's work. In fact, throughout the book of Nehemiah, these same villains continue to pop up and throw monkey-wrenches into Nehemiah's plans.

And it wasn't just Nehemiah. If you make a list of heroes in the Bible, you'll discover one common denominator they all share: opposition. Moses faced resistance countless times while wandering the desert for forty long years. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. David had to slay a giant and escape Saul's wrath. Paul was arrested, beaten, and shipwrecked. Most of the apostles were killed for their faith. And, oh yeah, let's not forget that Jesus was murdered by the very people He came to save!

Opposition is a prerequisite to achieving any great dream. Especially a God-sized dream. Don't be concerned when you are facing opposition; be concerned when your dreams are so small there is no reason for opposition.

We faced a lot of opposition during our efforts to launch and grow Next Level Church. For example, we had exactly \$270 as our operating budget when we put together our first service. We also had no building, no property, and no congregation. However, the most destructive obstacles I had to overcome were my own sense of inadequacy and the criticism of other people who thought we had no chance of succeeding. (I'll talk

about that a little more in chapter 4, which is about the resistance we face as we pursue our dreams.)

As I continue to work through opposition, one of the Scripture verses that encourages me the most is Psalm 3:3: "But you, O LORD, are a shield around me; you are my glory, the one who holds my head high."

When you face opposition, remember that God is your defender—but also remember that in order to be lifted up, you need to start low. Let me say it this way: God can't lift a head that isn't first bowed. We often make the mistake of trying to fight back and defend ourselves against opposition through our own wisdom and strength. That's a bad idea. Our best posture when staring in the face of obstacles is to bow in humility.

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God has promised to lift our heads high, so don't hinder His work by trying to elevate yourself.

## WHAT'S YOUR GOD-SIZED DREAM?

Now it's your turn. Take a moment to think about your life and your dreams. What are the goals God has planted in your heart? What is a God-sized dream you have always wanted to pursue?

If you're having trouble pinning it down, think again through the characteristics we explored earlier:

- **Need:** What breaks your heart today? What are some needs in the world or in your community that always catch your attention? What are problems that prompt you to think, *Someone needs to do something about this?* That someone could be you!
- **Opportunity:** Where has God been opening doors in your life? What are some opportunities that made you feel excited—and if you didn't end up taking those opportunities in the past, could they still be there if you decided to jump?
- **Abilities and Experience:** What are some of the ways God has gifted you? What are some of the life experiences that have shaped you into the person you are today? You are a unique, talented individual whom God has uniquely designed to accomplish His will. (Note: if you have trouble thinking about your own talents, try talking with those who know you best. Ask them what they think you do really, really well.)

- **Opposition:** Have you started pursuing a dream but then gave it up because of all the obstacles thrown in your way? Maybe those obstacles were proof that you were on the right track! Think back over recent months and identify those moments when it seemed like your spiritual Enemy, circumstances, or opinions were pushing you away from a goal or desire. Perhaps that goal or desire was never meant to die.

If you know your God-sized dream, find a pen and write it down in the space below. Spill some ink! Make it official. What is your God-sized dream? What's a prayer you'll start believing again that God will answer? What hope or desire or promise have you dropped that you need to pick back up and start running with?

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Keep this dream in mind as we work through the chapters to follow.

One final note: don't overthink things as you work to identify your God-sized dream(s). Just the other day, as my family and I were leaving our home to go out to dinner, I stopped and said, "Ah, I forgot my phone. Malachi, can you go grab it for me? I think it's in the kitchen."

Malachi ran off, eager to be the hero. But after a few minutes of looking he came back and said, "Dad, I can't find it."

Confused, I started patting down my body, which is when

I realized the phone had been in my back pocket the whole time. Have you ever done that? Actually, I've done worse. One time I started asking where my phone was, and then I noticed Jennifer pointing at it—in my hand!

Here's my point: in the same way I sometimes try to find a phone that isn't lost, we often try extra hard to discover dreams that aren't hiding. We sometimes ignore God-given dreams because they don't seem spiritual enough or important enough, or seem too simple and obvious. (Remember Colonel Sanders and his life-changing fried chicken?) Or worse, we fall into the trap of comparing our dreams with the dreams of others. For example, you might hear about a celebrity pastor with a dream and a mission to end world hunger, or a famous musician giving millions to charity—and then you start to feel embarrassed about the dream God planted in your heart to tutor kids who are struggling in school.

That's a natural response, but it's unhelpful. In fact, it's destructive.

Please hear me: you are responsible only for being faithful to the dreams God has called *you* to steward. Don't sit on the sidelines wondering where your dream is when, like Nehemiah, God has placed it right in front of you. No, you're not too old. No, you're not too young. You're not a collection of yesterday's mistakes, and you haven't used up your potential. You are God's masterpiece, and He has uniquely created you to accomplish your specific purpose.

Your great, big, beautiful tomorrow is just a God-sized dream away. It's right in front of you! But to find it, you may need to overcome some of the temptations that often cause us to stop dreaming.



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