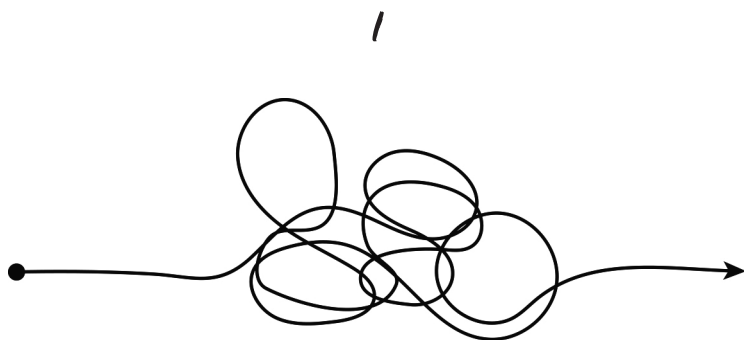




DESPERATELY *SEEKING* DIRECTION

BUT IN THE MEANTIME...

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THE *SEARCH* IS ON!

Deep down, what do people truly want? Money? Influence? Love? Their own private island with a personal chef and staff? A spot at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list? Adoring fans at movie premieres and concerts?

When we survey celebrities on magazine covers and Instagram posts, we might think they have it all. What more could they possibly want? And yet, we often read of the restlessness of their hearts as they try anything to satisfy their souls. Despite checking off nearly every wish-list item, even they desperately desire the gift of direction.

The Bible has its own superstars like David and celebrities like Queen Esther. The pages of Scripture also talk about the lifestyle of a rich and famous king. Solomon had bling long before bling was a thing. He proved himself an international influencer before the internet, Facebook, and Twitter. King Solomon had the skills to be a first-rate tweeter. All his proverbs contained clever sayings that easily fit the character limit.

He also had lots of lovers in the form of wives and concubines. Whether he achieved true love remains to be seen. In fact, some people believe that the crazy love story in Song of Solomon may actually tell the tale of a shepherdess refusing the hand of the king to be with the shepherd she loved. Solomon looked like he had it all, but maybe he really didn't.

And yet he started off so well.

When the Lord offered Solomon the amazing gift of granting his heart's desire, the young king asked for wisdom. Overcoming his appetite for materialism and his ambitious pride opened the door for God to grant him riches and renown. We often credit Solomon for the prudence of his decision. We view him as wise beyond his years because he made a clever choice before receiving the gift of divine wisdom. But perhaps Solomon's choice wasn't strategic but rather reflected a very real need that almost everyone has. Faced with the overwhelming challenges ahead of him, Solomon needed wisdom. All over the world, people of all ages, walks of life, and almost any demographic we can think of desperately need direction.

Polls and social media might point us to influence, notoriety, and enough gold to make Scrooge McDuck look like a pauper, trending among the top aspirations of humanity. But even the people who possess this seeming trifecta of happiness often find themselves listless, lost, and desperately seeking direction. They reinvent themselves, change partners, and risk their money for help. But their yearning for earnings leaves them unhappy. As a result, they turn to fortune tellers, gurus, self-help experts, and likely even ask Siri, Google, Cortana, and other AI for advice.

We live in a world where so many people greatly desire to find their true life path. But false life paths and rabbit trails present themselves everywhere. Like Hansel and Gretel, we often flounder around, looking for breadcrumbs to find our way out of the

forest, only to discover that the birds ate the morsels that marked the trail. Metaphorical houses with candy-cane hinges, chocolate doors, and lollipops the size of lamps entice us; but somehow, we sense the danger lurking within. At least, I hope we do.

Turning from fairy tales to mythology, we may find that the maze of life mirrors Theseus's experience. A minotaur awaits us unless we have help from the outside, someone to give us a string, a lamp, or a voice to run to in our time of need.

The situation may seem bleak. We have so much hope and so much promise. At the same time, we have so much fear and utter trepidation. Perhaps we should rush in and take the minotaur by the horns. Maybe we should be patient and wait. Does anyone ever really know what to do?

Even if we take a leap of faith, we may find ourselves second-guessing our decisions. Depending on our particular situation, we may feel trapped. Some feel imprisoned in a world of options. So many colleges, job opportunities, and potential friends appear on the scene that we have difficulty navigating them. But is that school right? Will that position pay off in the long run even if it pays the bills today? Will we find true friends? And will we find a best friend—someone to spend the rest of our lives with? Our list of Facebook friends may rival anyone, but why do we feel so lonely?

Others of us may feel caged by poverty or by fulfilling the loyal but difficult obligation of taking care of sick and aging family members or by feeling trapped in relationships of convenience that may seem comfortable and could lead to marriage, but they could inconvenience our future if we hold onto them. We desperately want to have opportunities, but can we make them work? Will our family put us down for seeking to better ourselves? What will the family do without us? Why do we stay in a relationship that may not fulfill us?

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In truth, no matter our station in life, we all face these challenges. When we are young, people tell us we have our whole lives before us, so we need to use those years wisely. With life-spans increasing, many people find themselves reexamining their goals and choosing new career paths due to changing interests, economic woes, and our chimera-like global economy.

All generations must wrestle with finding direction. As the wise writer of Ecclesiastes said, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9, ESV). We all have to make choices about our labors and measure the impact we can have on the world. But we also need to take time to enjoy our lives, for Ecclesiastes also speaks of eating, drinking, and being merry (Ecclesiastes 8:15). And we definitely should enjoy the times of celebration if we are blessed with a person we can spend our life with (Proverbs 5:18).

We probably know a lot of these things. We have so many answers at our fingertips. We have so many people willing to give us advice—from podcasters to tweeters to self-help experts to pastors to nosy neighbors prying into our business.

So why can't we figure things out?

One reason may be that we unknowingly practice self-sabotage. A recent study revealed that the highs we feel when making good decisions come from the same part of the brain that causes us to fear the unknown.¹

Our brains are clearly quirky!

We want to step up to the plate and blast the first pitch over the fence as the crowd cheers. But what if we get knocked out by a fastball? We want to compose the lyrics to a song, set it to music, and perform it for the first time in front of the people who will become our adoring fans. But what if we botch it? What if we overstep our talent? After all, we've seen those reality singing competitions where people who thought their voices resonated

the sweet melody of a cooing dove actually radiated the cacophonous croak of a frog. And not even the kiss of a princess could turn that croaker into a bona fide crooner.

We could go on and on and on.

We could list success stories and narratives of failure. We could talk about the people who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and achieved success through the help of the Lord. We could talk about others who had no boots or straps for leverage, but the kindness of others and the gift of God allowed them to become something they previously thought impossible. We could talk about still others who just wanted to roam the world barefoot, choosing to walk under corporate ladders rather than climb them. Almost everyone said they made an unlucky choice, but then why do they seem so happy?

And why can't we be happy?

Why can't we find that place of balance where we learn to harness our abilities and even put our fears to work for our good?

Why can't we pull the trigger on that dream we keep having?

But is it too late?

But what if the timing isn't right?

After all, there is a time and a season for every purpose under the heavens (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Maybe there are times when we need to wait for the right opportunity. Time isn't passing us by. We are simply passing on bad alternatives.

Here's a key fact to remember: *We can turn down wrong paths, or we can turn down wrong paths.*

Ponder that for a while.

Did you get it?

We can walk down wrong paths, or we can choose to avoid them.

Perhaps that's why everything seems so confusing. The advice we receive can seem ambiguous or contradictory. Sometimes the

exact same words can be read two different ways. We struggle to know what to do because the world is a perplexing place full of promises, pitfalls, purpose, pointlessness, pithy sayings, and powerful sermons.

Maybe our problem is that we just don't know how to interpret all the things we hear.

The world is tricky. And the world is especially tricky when we think we might have heard from God. So many people say, "I've heard from God" with such confidence that we may wonder what's wrong with us. To be honest, we may also wonder what's wrong with them. Even though we believe we can hear from God, we have to ask ourselves if the Almighty truly spoke to us or someone else.

In some moments, we can feel very confident about the word we received from the Lord. On other occasions, we may not be so sure we really heard from Him. The reality is that the direction we are evaluating will be tested. The testing will confirm its veracity or lack thereof.

The story of Joseph features dreams tested by harsh realities and a young person on the edge of seeing those hopes realized or on the verge of falling off the deep end. Joseph started out life in the best position with the favor of his father and a splendid coat of many colors to reflect his status. His amazing dreams revealed he even had God on his side. Jacob's affection angered Joseph's brothers. Their kid brother's talk of his future incensed them. They envied that special place Joseph held in the heart of their father. Envy brought strife, and strife brought confusion and evil works into a good young man's life.²

Joseph confidently told his family of his dreams. Even his father seemed awed by the audacity of this bold upstart kid who claimed that his parents would bow down to him. The nerve of

this guy! And yet, his father pondered the situation in his heart just like a woman named Mary would do many years later.

Joseph knew he had heard from God. He thought his dreams would bring him great blessings. Joseph was destined for higher heights, but did he realize the depths to which he would fall?

He fell into the depths of a deep pit.

He journeyed into the depths of Egypt.

He would go even further down as he found himself in the depths of a prison.

Amazingly, the plan of God required all three to work. But Joseph had a problem: his situation made absolutely no sense to him because he had not been disobedient. Although he lived far before the time of the prophet Jonah, he was no Jonah!

Joseph faithfully served his father and his family. He faithfully served Potiphar and the keeper of the prison. So why did his life keep going down, down, down?

We know why the prophet Jonah's life kept circling the drain. He disobeyed God. Instead of going to Nineveh, he went down to Joppa. Then he went down to the pier, then down to the boat, and then down below decks. Eventually, the disobedient Jonah found himself going down into the water and down into the belly of the great fish. His life was a real downer, but at least he knew why.

Poor Joseph had seen his very own midnight movie in a dream starring him. (If you're wondering if he saw Donnie Osmond in his technicolor dreamcoat, then God bless you!) In the dream, the protagonist Joseph found himself on top of the world. But the One directing the program never let him read the whole story. The advance copy of the script left out all the negatives he would face. No one told him that a hero's journey often leads to the valley of the shadow of death. Since he was presumed dead, Joseph was living in just such a valley.

But Joseph expected so much more out of life. Based on his dreams, Joseph knew he would rise over his brothers. But the divine screenwriter never told him about the twist where they would throw him into a pit. For all of his foreknowledge, Joseph failed to recognize how his brothers might view his dreams. What Joseph saw as confidence, they viewed as smug arrogance. The extras in the story serving as the slave traders who purchased him did not appear in the list of characters Joseph saw in his dream.

Joseph tried to play his part by excelling in Potiphar's estate. Garnering the respect of the man of the house through his diligence, Joseph attempted a riches to rags to riches comeback, trading his coat of many colors and slave robes for a coat befitting Potiphar's household manager.

Perhaps Joseph even began to think about the potential for a leading lady in his life. Someone had a similar idea, but with very different designs. Potiphar's wife set her sights on Joseph. Although he repeatedly resisted her advances, she sent his star crashing back to the earth. The evidence of his lost coat in a false accusation of rape condemned him and sent him spiraling into a deeper pit in the prison.

Many people would not blame Joseph if he had chosen to give up at that point. He lived in a filthy Egyptian prison with murderers, thieves, and charlatans who had no doubt cooked up pyramid schemes as they made off with other people's money. Joseph might have only found solace in the fact that the prison shielded him from the hot Egyptian sun. That ironic little ray of hope was about the only ounce of blessing that most people could have clung to in the depths of darkness.

Even if Joseph thought that every cloud had a silver lining, someone would be there to tell him that the silver lining of that cloud is actually lightning. They say lightning doesn't strike twice

in the same place. But don't tell that to Joseph, because two huge bolts had struck him head on. Worse yet, the lightning hadn't really illuminated anything for him. He just dwelt in a deeper darkness. Because Joseph faced the sting of failure after so much hard work and faithfulness, he should not have had any reason to believe that his situation could change.

And yet, he did.

He remained steadfast. The man who seemingly had no future found purpose as the second-in-command to the keeper of the prison. Things were looking up . . . well, as much as they could look up in an Egyptian prison.

But Joseph had no stories to hold on to during his time in prison. He lived long before the powerful account of Paul and Silas, singing praises to God at midnight before the Lord sent a mighty earthquake to deliver them from jail.

Perhaps Joseph's prison plight served as the role model for their jail breakthrough. Joseph's acts of loyalty to God and faithful service in the midst of one tragedy after another inspired others. Lew Wallace, the author of *Ben-Hur*, likely thought of Joseph when he placed the titular protagonist in the prison galleys, a slave trapped in the depths who would one day rise to a position of prominence.

So many times we want to look for the story that inspires us to become who we are instead of being the story that will inspire others to be like us.

Now, there's nothing wrong with finding inspiration in others. The biblical narratives of the faithful and the testimonies of the righteous can take us through some exceedingly dark times. These seasons can prove quite difficult and may even make us feel like Joseph when the dream covenant God made with Him seemed like a distant dream. But what if it remains God's will to make us the star through:

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- hardship
- putting us in a pit
- wrongful imprisonment
- strengthening our hope and resolve

Almost everyone wants to be the leading man or the leading lady. In fact, an old saying tells us that we are all the heroes/heroines in our own life stories. But whether that stays in our imaginations or comes to fruition on the stage of life remains to be seen.

Our dreams may put us on the fast track to the top, but our reality may include many detours, demeaning experiences, and bouts of depression. And that word *bouts* reminds us that these times are like wrestling bouts or boxing matches. We can overcome them, but we will definitely need prayer, fasting, and the help of wise counselors.

To achieve victory and to see our dreams fulfilled, we must take the time to help others just as Joseph did when he met the butler and the baker and assisted them by interpreting their dreams.

Never underestimate the healing power of serving others during times of hurt.

Sometimes the remedy lies in helping others and listening to their dreams. Hearing the dreams of the butler and the baker gave Joseph a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to escape his plight. Joseph, the dreamer, found himself the interpreter of dreams.

While we might all like to be the star of our own dreams, so many times we find true fulfillment when we take on a supporting role by helping others interpret their dreams.

Sometimes we become so caught up in our wants and desires that we neglect to assist others. Although we can hardly accuse Joseph of being selfish in the prison, perhaps he had not behaved

as wisely as he could have with his brothers. By interpreting the dreams of others, perhaps Joseph recognized some of his own shortcomings. Although Joseph seemed perfect, he was not. He had flaws. He likely had too much pride.

God gave Joseph confidence and resolve so he could make his dreams come true. But a Joseph who had never experienced the hardship of the prison, Potiphar's house, and the pit would not have possessed the necessary leadership acumen to save his family and the world from famine.

So many times we want the express elevator to the top, but so many have ridden it, only to jump off the roof or crash down the stairs because they lacked the necessary skills to save the day. And how many followers jumped off with them? How many saw their dreams dashed due to their leader's failures?

Whether he knew it or not, Joseph needed to face all the obstacles he encountered. His dreams may have caused him to think he would leap over them like a track star speedily overcoming high hurdles, but the hurdles often set Joseph back even when he overcame them.

Success is supposed to breed success, but sometimes success breeds failure, especially in a sinful world where envy and strife try to drag us all down into the pit and the prison. Thankfully, we have a Savior who can deliver us from these places and bring us to the right place.

When we are disappointed, we must remember that God has not appointed us to a life of disappointment. Instead, the Almighty has appointed us a more abundant life (John 10:10). Such a life is not completely filled with brightness. The truly artistic life conceived by the master painter includes depth, shade, and even places where we feel like we have fallen off the edge of the canvas.

Such masterpieces take time. We often want the success story of our lives to be like a Bob Ross painting. The popular PBS artist would finish a piece in one episode, producing a wonderful scene. In the time that we could cook a pizza in the oven or have a pie delivered, Ross would have completed his task. Ross would often appear to mess up the painting, only to transform his seeming mistake into a spectacular addition to the picture. While we can take comfort in the Lord's ability to fix our mistakes, we cannot assume that the Almighty will finish the work as hastily as Ross. God may seem like Michael Jordan or Tom Brady since He really loves last-second shots and last-minute comebacks.

Some say that we serve an on-time God. We like the sound of that, but perhaps we have trouble truly grasping the meaning of that phrase. In reality, we serve an eternal Savior unencumbered by the limits of time. Therefore we, like Joseph, have difficulty waiting on the Lord. Joseph certainly discovered the importance of patience and timing as he lingered two long years, almost in vain, hoping the butler would remember him. In the meantime, God worked behind the scenes setting in motion a series of events, creating a challenge that only Joseph could address.

The dreamer would once again become the dream interpreter.

The slave would rise from the prison.

The prisoner would trade a set of rags for a royal robe.

But how would Joseph achieve his goal? We could simply point out that Joseph possessed a connection to the divine that the Egyptians lacked. We could point to the perplexing nature of Pharaoh's dream as the ultimate puzzle that stumped the magicians and wise men of Egypt. We could offer multiple answers to the question, and many would be right.

To fully comprehend the answer, however, we must look to an ancient Egyptian text known as the Book of Dreams. In doing

so, we can learn more about our own dreams and our relentless drive for direction.

Questions to Consider

1. If you could receive direction in one area of your life, what would it be?
2. What do you truly desire in life?
3. What complicates the fulfillment of your goals, the realization of your dreams?
4. Who is someone you could assist in seeing his or her dream come true?
5. What stories inspire you? How would you like your life story to inspire others?

Key Takeaways

- A. Wisdom is something essential we need for the survival of our hopes and dreams.
- B. God may not reveal all the details of the path to successfully following His will because, like Joseph, we would not fully understand them at the time.
- C. Find inspiration in the stories of others, but also look to create a testimony that inspires others.
- D. We think that focusing on our own dreams is the key to success, but sometimes helping others with their dreams will bring us to the place where God intends us to be.
- E. We may all find ourselves in the prison of disappointment, but God may have put us there in certain seasons to appoint us to greater positions in the future.