

FOLLOWING
GOD
One Yes
AT A TIME

CONNIE CAVANAUGH



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I

THE DREAM

*The LORD is my rock, my fortress,
and my deliverer, my God.*

PSALM 18:2

Oblivious to the late-summer sun warming his back, Gerry hunched, unmoving, atop a huge rock on the hillside below our home, head in hands, elbows on knees, legs in the lotus position. The rock lay like a sleeping buffalo on the hillside, making it a perfect refuge for respite from the demands of the telephone, two toddlers, and me. Mostly me. I had an endless honey-do list.

Gerry didn't discover this rock until after the big grassfire. Prior to the blaze, brome grass, buck brush, chokecherry, and pin cherry bushes, along with an accumulated pile of junk previous tenants had stashed out there made the area an eyesore. The fire was Gerry's solution to my nagging to clean up the unsightly mess. We got the idea for the burn from a neighbor who had torched his backyard in the spring to clear brush and debris and make a place for a lawn. The grass started growing within a few weeks! His fire fizzled out in puffs of steamy smoke in the spring snow banked beneath the wire fence around his yard.

"Just burn the hillside," I suggested innocently.

Gerry agreed, but he was a busy man. Weeks passed. It was the hottest, driest spring on record. In mid-June, Gerry decided to surprise me with a tidy hillside. After I left for work, he ran a line of gasoline along the top edge of the hill and casually tossed a lit match toward the soaked grass.

Kaboom! The fire took off in every direction. Gerry stomped out the flames galloping toward our house and then noticed that just in front of our walkout basement a carpet was smoldering because it was draped over four flaming sawhorses. Our water heater had boiled over the week before, flooding the basement, and Gerry had manhandled the sodden rug out to the sunny little plateau to dry. He yanked the carpet away from the burning sawhorses and jumped up and down on it, trying to put out the flames. As he was doing that, the grassfire gained momentum and headed down the two-acre hillside.

The carpet fire put out, Gerry hooked up the hose to control the grassfire, but the hottest part of the fire was already beyond its water-squirting reach. From inside the house he grabbed a small throw rug and a plastic garbage can. Dashing back outside, he filled the pail and soaked the rug so he could beat back the flames. No sooner did he subdue the blaze in one area then he would dash off to take on the flames somewhere else. He was horrified by the size and fury of the fiery beast that was creating its own wind. He said it felt like a blast furnace.

Gerry realized he needed help. Running to the scattered homes of our nearest neighbors, he frantically pounded on doors, yelling, “There’s a fire! It’s coming your way!”

The Nonvoluntary Ladies Fire Brigade

The only people home at that time of day were four elderly women. They grabbed rakes, hoses, and gunnysacks, and came running, aprons flapping over their housedresses. Connecting their hoses to make a longer hose line, they filled their pails and, sloshing water, lugged them to the most threatening sections.

They stomped their oversized rubber boots.

They flailed sodden sacks.

They raked the embers into piles and poured water on them.

Inch by inch they beat back the flames, hoping to stop the fire before it consumed the holiday cottages nestled among the overhanging poplars and aspens along the lakeshore.

“I don’t think we’re gonna get it out,” Gerry gasped, chest heaving as he filled his pail.

“Oh we’re gonna get it out, all right!” shouted our usually good-natured neighbor Florence. “Or you’ll be sorry!”

Gerry dove in with renewed vigor.

Hours later, when the old gals were satisfied the fire was out and had little chance of reigniting, they gathered at the large rock where Gerry had slumped after putting out the last tendril of fire. Circling him, they made sure he understood what his job was for the remainder of that day: to keep a sharp lookout and quench even the tiniest puff of smoke. “Or else!” they added. (The locals now joke that Gerry is the minister who put the word “arson” in parson.)

Surprise, Surprise!

Late that afternoon I got off the bus on the highway in front of our church and walked down the 100-yard gravel driveway toward home. I couldn’t see the denuded hillside from the driveway, but I was puzzled by a hint of smoke in the air. When I stepped inside the house and saw a trail of sooty water across the white linoleum, my kitchen throw rug in a soggy, blackened pile, and the scorched carbuncular blob that once had been my garbage can, I knew something was amiss. Looking for answers, I went back outside. Florence was striding across our lawn, coming toward me. She hailed me with, “What is it with Baptist preachers and fire? The last guy did the same dang thing!” Florence’s sense of humor was back as she howled at her own joke. Refreshed by a hot shower and a stiff drink, her eyes danced in her weathered face. Seeing the look of confusion on my face, she simply pointed to the edge of the hill. “Your husband is down there, and he’s probably hungry.” I rushed to the lip of the hill and gasped. Our entire two acres was blackened, with charcoal peninsulas snaking onto the neighboring properties as well.

Seeing me atop the hill gave Gerry a saved-by-the-cavalry-feeling after several solitary hours at his post. I minced my way downhill in my high heels and ivory pantsuit. Blacker than a chimney sweep, Gerry sat atop the rock clutching the burned off end of a dribbling hose that had so many small geysers along its length that little pressure remained. After glancing at me briefly, his reddened eyes darted to and fro in

search of smoke. Deadly earnest, he told me how he had saved our home and then, together with his valiant crew, the lakeside cottages and possibly the town.

After listening to his story, I headed back up the hill and into the kitchen to fix Gerry a sandwich. When I got there, the dam burst and I laughed until I cried.

Sitting on the Rock

Gerry had had more time than usual to think that day because he was pinned to the “lookout” rock until sundown. From that point on the rock became his place to retreat to when he needed to think and pray. This was where three years and two babies later God gave him a dream.

“Finish your education,” He said.

“What! Now? I have a wife and two kids to support!” Gerry responded. “And things are just getting going in the church. Why would I leave now?”

“Follow Me.”

“But how am I going to do it?”

“I’ll be your rock. I’ll go with you.”

Gerry lacked one year to earning his bachelor’s degree. And he dreamed of attaining a master’s in ministry. His education had been interrupted a year after the grassfire when our first baby came along and I swapped my teacher’s briefcase for a diaper bag. Our tiny church could barely handle the upkeep on the building, much less pay for a pastor, so Gerry worked two part-time jobs. He drove a school bus on weekdays and helped the local butcher on Saturdays. (The first time he cut up a beef hind quarter without supervision, his boss yelled, “I said butcher it, not massacre it!”)

Now God gave Gerry a dream: finish the education he had started several years before. But the closest affiliated seminary was 1200 miles away and located in the United States, where there was little opportunity for legal employment for foreign students. We had no savings. We had two preschoolers I was staying home to raise. Gerry and I were both nearing 30, so we were way past the age where our parents would pitch in and help us financially.

The timing was all wrong. The process looked complicated. The dream seemed impossible. With all our hearts we wanted to follow God, but we felt like we were facing a runaway grassfire without a hose, bucket, sack, or help. We wondered, *Where would we even begin?*

A Purpose, a Promise, a Plan

Can you relate? Have you had your own “rock” encounter with God? Did He plant a dream in your heart that you had no idea how to achieve? Have you ever sensed Him urging you to further your education, change careers, move to a faraway place, write a book, make a film, end a destructive relationship, kick a habit, change jobs, improve your marriage, graciously adapt to a new and unwanted status, update your professional skills, be a more effective parent, care for an aging relative, love a difficult child, adopt a healthier lifestyle, accept a circumstance you hate but can’t change? What is God challenging you to do right now in your life? How have you responded to Him in the past? How will you respond now?

When God gives us dreams, He has a purpose, a promise, and a plan!

God’s purpose is identical for every believer: to make us more like Christ as we follow Him. He will never ask us to do anything that does not lead to our growth in godliness and increased goodness for others:

“For I know the plans I have for you”—this is the LORD’s declaration—“plans for your welfare, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

His promise is to take us (be with us) as we follow the dreams He gives us. Right after God tells Moses, “Go. I am *sending* you to Pharaoh,”¹ He adds, “I will certainly *be with you.*”² He even tells Moses, “I will help you speak and I will teach you what to say.”³ How’s that for a hands-on approach?

Jesus restated God's message in His own way when He told the disciples, "My sheep hear My voice, I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish—ever! No one will snatch them out of My hand."⁴ We pursue our dreams hand-in-hand with God—He promises!

His plan is unique to every believer: He calls us as we are to use what we have as we follow Him step-by-step. Every believer is different so our pathways will not be identical. If fulfilling the dream will require more than we have to give at the outset, God will lead us step-by-step to acquire what is needed along the way. We start by utilizing the gifts, talents, abilities, and interests He has already created within us or led us to develop. In other words, the instant He places His dream in your heart, you are ready to go. Nothing is holding you back from saying yes.

We are His creation—created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10).

He who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6).

The Dream Is a Picture-promise

A good way to think of the dream is as a picture-promise. For instance, most people who want to lose weight have a picture in their mind that motivates them. Some add "lost" pounds of butter to a stack in their refrigerator to visually represent their progress. Some blowup an old photo of themselves when they were at their goal weight and tack it to the refrigerator. I even know some women who constructed a fake woman with the pounds they lost and tried to make her as fat as possible. They named her Tiffany and kept a running tab on how big she was. Last time I checked Tiff was nearing 300 pounds.

A picture-promise is the vision of our dream that is ever before us as we move forward. When God promised Abraham he would be the father of nations, God told him to picture his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, the sand on the seashore, and the dust in the

air.⁵ When God promised Moses He would help him free the Israelites from bondage, He gave him a picture of where they were headed: a land flowing with milk and honey⁶—a place where walled cities were already built and vineyards were already in production.

God gives us picture-promises too, which we adopt as our dreams the minute we say yes.

Spiritual Stretch Marks

God did not give me a dream to run marathons, do accounting, develop marketing strategies, invent games, design software, or work in retail. How do I know? I'm not good at those pursuits. I don't have the gifts or interests needed for them. That's not to say that a small portion of my life doesn't involve doing some of those things. As I pursue the dream of being a speaker and writer, I do have to do some things outside my interests, such as keeping financial records, selling products, and marketing.

God stretches us so that we grow. He will lead us into areas that will complement or enhance our main goals. We may be led to accomplish things that might surprise us and those who know us. He personalizes His plan for our lives. And He goes along with us every step of the way to guide, encourage, help, teach, stretch, and correct us.

When God gave me the dreams to be a writer and a speaker, I said yes and began following Him one yes at a time. It wasn't easy. The first time I had to travel to complete a writing assignment, I was so terrified to stay alone in a hotel room that I contacted some old friends and asked if they would let me stay in their home instead. That meant I had to rent a car and drive an hour each way to get to my assignment each day instead of simply walking across the street from the nearest hotel. The first time I was given a magazine cover story, my submission was so awful the editor had to start all over and write it herself at the eleventh hour because she couldn't use what I submitted. The first time I gave a talk at a luncheon I was supposed to speak for 20 minutes and I talked for an hour and a half.

Since those shaky beginnings, God has molded and shaped, refined and revamped, removed and improved, nipped and tucked (I wish He

did facelifts!) so that He could use me to make a positive difference in the world I live in. God takes us as we are and makes us into what we need to be to realize His purposes (our dreams).

Are you wondering what kind of dreams God gives? Or how to know if a dream is from Him? Are you worried He'll give you a dream you don't want? Let's cover a few basic principles before we dive in.

God Gives the Dreams

God pursues His children. *He* comes after *us*. He always has. That is a pattern established in Scripture. Before the birth of the Christ, God manifested Himself in many ways—messenger angels, a flaming bush, and a pillar of fire to name a few. He also spoke through His prophets. Then He sent His Son Jesus, who walked and talked and lived among mankind while teaching God's ways. Today we have the Bible and the Holy Spirit to communicate God's truths to us. God wants us to know His plans just as much (or more) than we want to know them! So we need not fret about being left in the dark. Instead, we need to focus on *actively listening* and *earnestly seeking Him*.

Actively Listen; Earnestly Seek

A listener-seeker has a certain position, placement, and posture. Your position with God is that He is God and you are not. That may seem obvious. He knows everything; you do not. He loves you more than you love yourself. He sees your eternal future; you see only the immediate future. He knows what surprises are around the next corner; you are caught by surprise.

You are ready to hear from God when you understand you are the clay and He is the Potter. Then you place your clay pot where He is most likely to fill it. What does that look like? If you were a hunter and you wanted to bag a moose, where would you go to find it? Manhattan or Alaska? In the same way, if you want to hear from God, place yourself where you're most likely to encounter Him. Get into the Bible. Join a church. Find a mentor. Make friends with believers who are accustomed to hearing from God. Tune in to Christian speakers and scholars on the radio, television, and Internet.

Finally, I encourage you to adopt the posture of being a keen learner. Listen eagerly. Show up early. Take notes. Ask questions. Do extra reading. Lean in close. Pay attention. “If you seek Him, He will be found by you.”⁷

Don't Jump the Gun

Every dream has its own timeline, so wait for the starter pistol. Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, “There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven.” David was anointed king, but it took many years and time on the run from King Saul before David wore the crown that was rightfully his (1 Samuel 16–31).

One of the hardest activities for us to do is wait. Sometimes waiting is part of the plan. Once we know the dream, we want to go after it. Remember, God holds the starter pistol. Don't jump the gun. Watch and wait. My dream to be a writer (God's purpose for me) began in my 20s or maybe even sooner. I wasn't a published author until I was in my 40s. Why? Lots of reasons, but the main one was because other dreams required my immediate and focused attention: marriage, ministry, and maternity. I married a pastor and had two babies within three years.

Let God Be the Judge

You're ready to move toward the dream when God says so. Even though you may think you are qualified, equipped, and available, God may ask you to wait. Conversely, when you may think you're unqualified, ill-equipped, or too busy, God may urge you forward immediately. The timing is not up to us.

I met a woman several years ago who introduced herself as a Christian speaker. She had a prayer team, a focus group, and a fulltime assistant. Her teaching materials were researched and sorted into three-ring binders. She could give a keynote address or present a weekend retreat on a variety of topics. She had a glossy promotional package, complete with DVDs of her teachings that had been widely distributed. She was impressive, and she was ready to get to work. But her calendar was empty. For reasons only God knew, she was in waiting mode. I know of other speakers with full calendars who jot down what they're going to talk about while on the airplane traveling to the event. God's timing

can be a mystery to us. He says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways” (Isaiah 55:8).

Do You Have Dreams?

Perhaps you sense God wants to take you somewhere or put something new into your life. Maybe you believe He wants you to be different in some way. Or perhaps He wants to give you hope where you lacked hope before. Each of these scenarios can be a template for your dreams. Is your lifelong dream to become a physician so you can devote your life to healing? Perhaps your dream is to homeschool your child so he or she can realize his or her full potential. Or maybe you have a short-term dream of fitting into that perfect little black dress...oops... I meant to say “a short-term dream of adopting healthier eating habits.” Each dream will have its own requirements, time span, and difficulties before it can be accomplished.

God gave Moses the dream to lead the Israelites (His chosen people) *to* the Promised Land. God gave Joshua the dream to lead the people to enter and *take* the Promised Land. The apostle Paul’s dream was to bring the Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. These huge, long-term dreams could only be realized one way—by following God one yes at a time. None of these dreams could be attained without God’s involvement. And the same is true for us. Our dreams won’t be fulfilled without our Creator God coming alongside *to make something out of the gifts, talents, and opportunities He’s given us. And He will do so only* when the time is right.

Barriers to Saying Yes

Have you been given a dream and then confronted thoughts such as these that hold us back from climbing off the rock?

- This dream is too big, and I don’t have what it takes.
- The process looks so complicated I’m not sure where to start.
- The finish line is so far away. I don’t think I can go the distance.

- I've tried before and dropped out, so I'm all out of chances.
- Is this God speaking or just wishful thinking on my part?
- People like me don't get to do these things. I'm not worthy.

The vast majority of the time, the barriers that keep us from saying yes to God aren't other people or circumstances or even lack of opportunity. No, they exist entirely inside our own heads. We let fear hold us back: This is too big, too complicated, too long-term. Guilt can step in: I should be able to do this...but I'm so scared. Shame muscles to the front and says, "I've messed up royally in the past and done so many things I regret. I don't deserve anything good from God." And along comes the weight of comparison (a subtle form of passing the buck): "Surely others are better suited for this than I am. I'll let them do it. They'll do a better job." And let's not forget about pride: This dream is not big enough. I'm made for a bigger "stage" than this! And last but not least, the icing on the cake is doubt: "How do I even know this is God speaking? Maybe I dreamed this up by myself. Am I deluding myself into thinking God could or would use me in a significant way?"

Gerry experienced some of these barriers as he sat on that rock and tried to absorb the enormity of the dream God had given him. Investing five years to complete the education he'd put on hold twice already seemed unreachable. And adding in the smaller income and more family responsibilities, the dream became ludicrous. Undoable. Impossible. Cue the runaway grassfire. And yet the dream was there. And God was saying, "I will be your rock wherever you go" (Psalm 18:2).

Because he'd started and quit before, Gerry didn't know how he could go back to school now. How was this time going to be any different? He worried he wouldn't make it to the finish. He wondered if he had what it took to be a successful student. And how could he be sure this was God's dream and not his own desire to move on.

Armed with little more than God's promise to go with him, Gerry said yes to following God, yes to accepting by faith that the dream was from Him, and yes to climbing down from the rock and getting started.

How Much Faith Does It Take?

After our family had moved from Saskatchewan to California and then to Quebec and on to Alberta, I met an old friend. I caught him up on the goings on of the last several years and the dreams God had given Gerry and me. I shared how we were following Him one yes at a time and moving forward. The friend, knowing the facts of how *small* we were in comparison to the size of our dreams (that God had given us), said, “I’m amazed at your faith! I never would have had the faith to do the things you’ve done or go to the places you’ve gone.”

But he was wrong. We didn’t have any more faith than he did or than you have. *We all have enough faith to do what God asks us to do.* The way we became believers was *by faith* (Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 3:9). At the moment of conversion most of us didn’t think we had much faith. But God is sufficient. He enabled us to say yes to Him then. And when we stare into the face of the dreams God gives us, we often question whether our faith is big enough to meet the challenge. It is...in Him!

Well-fed Faith

So how much faith does it take to say yes to God’s dream? That’s the wrong question. It’s not how much faith you have, it’s *what kind of faith* you have. Your faith needs to be well-fed. A couple we know spent 15 years in northern Nigeria. The husband and wife are both tall, and their children inherited that trait. Even as youngsters they quickly sprouted up. Their Fulani neighbors were also tall, but they often remarked on the more robust physiques of our friends’ kids in comparison to their own. The truth is that our friends’ children were healthier and stronger because they ate well. Part of the Fulani culture, dating back centuries, is not to “waste” food on toddlers since many of them die early. So the Fulani’s feed them just enough to survive. One of the results is that the growth of many of the children is affected. It’s not until they are old enough and strong enough to claim bigger portions of the food supply for themselves that they become healthier.

The same is true for our faith. We will have stunted faith if we don’t feed it well. What is well-fed faith? First let me say what it’s not.

Well-fed faith *is not* the by-product of being a passive recipient of preaching or having access to top-notch Christian programs. We've all heard people say they left their former churches in search of better ones because they weren't "getting fed." Granted, not all preachers are gifted orators, but even clumsy speakers can deliver God's truths. And, yes, not all churches offer a broad range of programs that span the cradle to the grave, but smaller faith communities provide ample opportunities for involvement at every level if people are willing to serve. Faith doesn't grow by listening to what others say about *how God works*.

Faith does not get fed by what it takes in; faith gets fed by what it puts out (James 1:22-25). A lot of Christians with stunted faith blame their condition on poor preaching, uninspired teaching, or lack of access to Christian programs. What they really need to do is take responsibility for developing their faith by talking to God. We can ask, "God, what do You want me to *do* with and for You?" Faith grows by *getting involved* where God is at work. Because faith grows like a muscle, it needs to be exercised, to be used. And have you noticed that it makes no difference what you feed your muscles, whether hamburger or filet mignon? If you use it, it will grow. "Use it or lose it," fitness buffs say. Faith buffs need to say the same thing. Faith that never gets used is stunted and will become shriveled and useless.

How much faith does it take to say yes to God and get off the rock of contemplation? If you are a child of God, it takes no more than what you already have. A more important question is, What kind of faith does it take to say yes to God and get moving? The answer? The kind of faith that is willing to be used. The kind of faith that may be weak but is willing to grow. Paul said, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). The only way to get your faith growing is to say yes to God and get off the rock. Saying yes *is the first step* to getting off the rock!

Once we get moving, what do we do? Take it one *simple, immediate, possible* yes at a time. We'll get into the meaning of those three adjectives as we go along, but let me illustrate what I mean in reference to getting off the rock. By the time our girls were ready to start school, Gerry only had one more year remaining to complete his master's degree. As the summer approached before his final year of studies,

I sensed God nudging me to pursue a teaching position to improve our financial standing. . . well, our “financial kneeling.” Trying to get a professional job using a degree from another country can be very complicated. (I think that’s why doctors and engineers from other countries drive taxis in the United States.) The more I looked into getting a teaching job in the States, the more impossible it seemed. I gathered enough information to conclude it was too complex to even know where to start. As I prayed and actively listened for God’s voice, a picture of my husband’s secretary’s face came to mind. Gerry was pastoring a church in California while getting his degree. His part-time secretary, Louise, was a retired California schoolteacher as well as a very organized thinker. “Call Louise!”

I contacted Louise and invited her for tea. She sat down at my kitchen table that was covered with teaching papers, information, and forms. I told her I wanted to get a teaching job in California and was hoping she could help me. Within the hour Louise laid out a step-by-step approach, showing me what needed to be done and in what order. With her help, I went from an “impossible dream” in June to employed in September.

What had I done? I said yes to the dream and followed God, taking each step only as it became clear. And when I was stalled and didn’t know what to do next, I asked God and He brought to my mind someone who was able to get me on track. Even though the dream seemed huge and complicated and impossible, God used Louise to map out the steps I could take each day to realize the dream—a fulltime teaching position.

Following God doesn’t have to be complicated. In fact, God doesn’t intend it to be a mystery. All of us can pursue His dreams for our lives if we follow Him one yes at a time. Achieving the dreams He gives is *always* possible, no matter how impossible it may seem. Even if you’ve never done anything like what your dream is, you don’t know where to begin, you’re too scared to try, you don’t think you have what it takes, you have tried and failed so many times you think you’ve run out of chances, you aren’t sure if the voice you heard is God’s, you *can* get off the rock by saying one *simple, immediate, possible yes* at a time.