IT'S NOT OVER

Leaving Behind Disappointment and Learning to Dream Again

JOSHUA GAGNON

Foreword by MARK BATTERSON
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JOSHUA GAGNON
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

“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
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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
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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
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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.

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.