

# ILLUSIONS OF GRANDEUR

RETHINKING SUCCESS IN THE LIGHT OF THE STORY OF JOSEPH



Vicky Calver

“Read it, dream it, and finish well” Martin Smith



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© 2006 by Vicky Calver

ISBN: 1 84427 180 3

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First published in the U.K. by Scripture Union, 2006

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover design: ie design

Internal design and typesetting by Creative Pages

Printed in Great Britain by Creative Print and Design, Ebbw Vale, Wales

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# Foreword

My earliest memories of church were being taken to a small gospel hall every Sunday. It seems hard to believe now but the men still wore suits and the ladies hats, we knew what songs were coming next as the hymn numbers were put on a board for all to see, and we all sang our hearts out, never fully drowning out the organ that was suspiciously louder than some guitar amps today! God gave me a dream even then to see church music played on the radio so that ordinary people, many who would never step foot in a church, would in some way be exposed to a message of hope and the good news.

Many years on, that dream is still alive and some of the things I imagined have happened. But here's the thing, nothing has gone to plan and there have been many disappointments along with the successes and I've had to learn the hard way that it's about remaining faithful to the God who gave us the dream in the first place. When you have dreams and ambitions in your hand you always imagine how it's going to look and feel. After all God put the dreams there and surely he is gonna see to it that it all happens for his glory. The only snag to this is that we find out that God is more interested in our hearts than our ambitions, even if they are mostly inspired by himself.

The Christian life is often described as a 'race' and we are called to finish it in one piece with dignity and our relationships still intact. Often we discover along the way that love is more powerful than our achievements and that purity in our walk with God is more eternally significant than the medals we earn.

This book is an honest account of the struggle between the call of God and the fact that life doesn't always turn out how we want it. To stay confident in our Creator that his will is perfect because he always knows best. Vicky is a shining example of someone who even through the struggles and disappointments has grasped the 'bigger' picture and been faithful in the small. She will see her God do extraordinary things in her lifetime. Read it, dream it and finish well.

**Martin Smith**, Lead vocalist of Delirious?

# 1 Yearning for more

(Genesis 49:22–26)

A prince among his brothers (Genesis 49:26).

JOSEPH IS THE YOUNGER brother who thought he could surpass the rest. He is the dreamer with big dreams. He aspires to be a prince – anything other than the frog! His story is loved by those who feel the same way. Particularly as all this will one day be achieved – but not in the way he anticipated.



I know Helen well. She was scarcely your average teenager because Helen had dreams; not about wealth and position but about significance. As a pastor's kid, she had heard numerous sermons on the subject of living a life that makes a difference. She knew the stories. She had also listened to other people's comments and was excited by the possibilities of what her life could be. Her concern for the poor even made her wonder if she would be the next Mother Theresa!

Through the years, Helen grew both in faith and academic ability. By university, she had settled into the rhythm of debating the foundations of Christianity, while being absolutely sure that she now understood them. In the midst of this certainty, her parents became convinced that God was calling them to a new sphere of Christian service – but in the USA. As

she took her finals, her parents packed up their home and prepared to leave.

No longer was Helen the only one following God into the unknown. Her parents went in one direction and she in another. For the next five years, she would live in four continents. She would work on behalf of the poor in India, Kenya and Rwanda, and would study for a Masters in the USA. Eventually she felt God's prompting to return home to the UK.

While overseas her certainty about life had been shaken. She had sat with people dying of AIDS, and had held a child who was literally starving to death. She had faced some of the complexities of life yet ultimately still expected all the pieces of *her* life to fit neatly together. After all, that was how all the great stories ended!

Returning to the UK proved to be a shock. She had followed God around the world; now she expected that he would give her a smooth transition back. But it was not to be. The months of readjustment plodded on as she sought to become established in the land that was still supposed to be her home. In time, she got temporary work and a room in a shared flat, but she was bored and restless. After ten months, she was offered a one-year contract working with HIV positive Africans in London. The work was stretching and interesting, but even this ended. She completed the year but the project could not be extended due to limited funds.

So now she found herself unemployed again. At the same time, one of her flatmates moved out and they struggled to find a replacement. The three remaining women had to cover the cost of the extra room or find themselves homeless. It was a tough time for Helen. Everything she had expected did not happen. No one seemed to want her! She found herself signing on with temping agencies, filling out application forms and waiting for phone calls.

Within a few days, she was offered two days' work distributing leaflets for a department store's Christmas sale. It was hardly stretching, nor what Helen felt she was capable of, but it was the only option available. Determined to work hard regardless of the mundane nature of the work, she trudged the London streets putting leaflets through letter boxes. Finally she was asked to stand on a street corner by the train station and distribute leaflets to passing commuters.

Many people walked past without a glance in Helen's direction. She felt shunned and irrelevant. Some took a leaflet but none smiled. Finally one gentleman stopped amidst the crowds and started talking to Helen. She was surprised but appreciated the diversion. He asked her whether this was the kind of work she would like to do long term. She said nothing but thought of the responsibilities that she had had only a week before. He then spoke of his work and suggested there might be some opportunities there. Helen was sceptical about his intentions but answered politely. As the gentleman moved away, he half turned and said, "You are literate, aren't you?"

If this were you, how would you respond? I was furious. Now Helen is no fictional character. Her story is my story, her dreams are my dreams and her questions are my questions. Helen is my middle name. I am Helen.

We all have dreams. For some it is being a professional footballer, for others it is being married with children, or climbing Mount Everest, or being a millionaire, a teacher or a film star. It may relate to job, position, achievements, wealth, or status. There is an assumption that success is achieving this goal. It is about big ambitions in acceptable categories. It is about fulfilling our dreams.

Now Joseph had big dreams. He dreamed of power and authority. His brothers would bow down to him. He would be acknowledged and respected. He would be a 'prince among his brothers' (Genesis 49:26). How tempting for us to dream in a similar way, and many of us do. Yet Joseph was to learn that life does not always work out as he expected.

I had to learn a similar lesson when I was asked if I was literate. This moment both crushed my self-esteem and taught me an essential lesson. I had so wanted to be valued and accepted and to have a 'significant' role. In many ways, I had a superhero view of life. I would swoop in and help others. I had built up the image that I could save the day, but was quickly discovering that others didn't view it that way. As my illusions of grandeur shattered, I started to ask what is really important in life.

Yet like me, how many of us have developed elaborate illusions of grandeur that are more about our own ego than anything else? We may be completely oblivious to the underlying assumptions of our actions, yet they reflect what we are really living for.

Dreams contain the hope of what could be and provide us with something to aim at, while illusions function more as a distortion and distraction. If I dreamed of swimming in my own pool then this could be an incentive to work to build one. Yet if I saw a mirage and thought it was a pool of water, I would get a shock if I tried to swim in it! In this way our dreams and illusions may be closely linked, yet function differently. One may cause us to want to achieve something; the other may lead us to believe that we already have.

This is brilliantly depicted in the film *Phone Booth*. It is the story of Stu Shepard, a 'successful' publicist. He wears smart clothes, looks good, has a wife and a girlfriend, and is followed around by a trainee. In keeping his affair secret from his wife,

he calls his girlfriend from a phone booth rather than on a mobile. It is as he leaves the phone booth that the phone starts ringing and he makes the choice to pick it up. From that moment, the illusion of his happy and successful life shatters as the man on the other end of the phone says that he has a gun pointed at Stu and will kill him. As Stu re-evaluates his life, he starts to look at what really counts. Finally he admits to his wife:

I think I need these clothes and this watch. My two-thousand-dollar watch is a fake and so am I. I neglected the things I should have valued most ... I've been dressing up as something I'm not for so long. I'm so afraid you won't like what's underneath. But here I am, just flesh and blood and weakness.<sup>2</sup>

How many of us, if we are really honest, would echo what Stu says? Stu had trusted his external image to hide his fears and concerns. He had not allowed himself to be vulnerable. He had lost the dream and was left with the illusion. Yet in sharing it with his wife he had the potential both to forgive himself and be forgiven, and so be restored.

Dreams are not static and may change with time. Yet as we get older, it is easy to become cynical and look down on our dreams. Some people seem to fulfil their dreams with few difficulties while others appear to have a much more circuitous route. The challenge is that many of our dreams include deadlines. We expect to have achieved certain things by a particular age and when this doesn't happen, we are left in crisis. This pressure has led Damian Barr to suggest that

Feeling you should be having, doing or being more is the core of the 'quarterlife crisis'. Suddenly, 30 is so close you can smell it and everyone is doing better than you (or seems to be). The excitement of graduation fades. Real life sets in. And it's expensive, ugly

and competitive ... We feel, even though we're only twenty-something, that our lives are in crisis. Why? Property has never been more expensive, work has never been so insecure and debt has never been so pervasive ... If as we are told, the world is our oyster, it's definitely a dodgy one.<sup>3</sup>

If our experiences resonate with this, then we may face the challenge of disillusionment as our expectations fail to match our reality. If our circumstances do not match this then we may wonder what all the fuss is about. Either way, there is the question of whether our dreams reflect the life that we should be heading for. There is a danger that we will get to the end of our lives and discover that we wasted our efforts on what we thought was important but which didn't really count.

In our achievement-orientated world, success appears to be measured by numbers: the value of our possessions; our weight on the scales; the amount in our wallet; our grades in exams; whether we have a partner and children; or the number of promotions we have received. We divide the world into haves and have-nots, or even people who have some or have more. If we are haves or have-mores then we are successful; if we don't we aren't.

This is not to suggest that we should live without dreams. To do so would be to reduce life to a series of mechanical actions in order to survive. What a potentially miserable existence and what a waste! Our dreams can enable us to look beyond our current situation. They give us something to aim for and can provide us with a glimmer of hope.

The challenge is not whether we should dream, but what we should dream about. Subconsciously we can build our lives on that which we perceive to be important to those around us, rather than question what really matters and who we would like to become. As Christians, we may have accepted the

value system of our culture rather than measure ourselves against the standards of a holy God.

We may dream, but are our dreams big enough to reflect the values of the God we claim to love? We only have one life. Each of us needs to be careful how we invest ours.

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‘This book is an honest account of the struggle between the call of God and the fact that life doesn’t always turn out how we want it.’

MARTIN SMITH, LEAD VOCALIST OF DELIRIOUS?

For Vicky Calver, as for so many people, the reality of adult life didn’t match what she had dreamed about the future. Rooted in vivid personal experience, *Illusions of Grandeur* explores the biblical story of Joseph to see how it can help us face up to the pains and frustrations that we often experience. With gripping real life stories and a frank grappling with the issues, this book seeks to answer some massive questions:

- Is it OK for Christians to be ambitious?
- At the end of the day, what is real success?
- What happens when our dreams clash with real life?

*Vicky Calver* is Strategic Development Manager for Global Connections. She is a regular public speaker at events like Spring Harvest – and a volunteer with AFC Wimbledon.



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ISBN 1 84427 168 4



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