

Joseph Interprets the Dreams of the Butler and Baker

Genesis 40

Genesis 40 - *"It came to pass after these things that the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their lord, the king of Egypt. ² And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief butler and the chief baker. ³ So he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison, the place where Joseph was confined. ⁴ And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he served them; so they were in custody for a while.*

⁵ Then the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison, had a dream, both of them, each man's dream in one night and each man's dream with its own interpretation. ⁶ And Joseph came in to them in the morning and looked at them, and saw that they were sad. ⁷ So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in the custody of his lord's house, saying, "Why do you look so sad today?"

⁸ And they said to him, "We each have had a dream, and there is no interpreter of it."

So Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please."

⁹ Then the chief butler told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "Behold, in my dream a vine was before me, ¹⁰ and in the vine were three branches; it was as though it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and its clusters brought forth ripe grapes. ¹¹ Then Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand."

¹² And Joseph said to him, "This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days. ¹³ Now within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your place, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand according to the former manner, when you were his butler. ¹⁴ But remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house. ¹⁵ For indeed I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews; and also I have done nothing here that they should put me into the dungeon."

¹⁶ When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was good, he said to Joseph, "I also was in my dream, and there were three white baskets on my head. ¹⁷ In the uppermost basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, and the birds ate them out of the basket on my head."

¹⁸ So Joseph answered and said, "This is the interpretation of it: The three baskets are three days. ¹⁹ Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head from you and hang you on a tree; and the birds will eat your flesh from you."

²⁰ Now it came to pass on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief butler and of the chief baker among his servants. ²¹ Then he restored the chief butler to his butlership again, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. ²² But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. ²³ Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him."

Background Notes

Genesis 40:1 says that the Pharaoh's butler and baker had offended their master, the king of Egypt. Probably they were suspected of a plot against Pharaoh, and as a result they were both thrown into prison - the very same prison where Joseph was confined. That was not a coincidence! God planned and controlled this event for His purpose of ultimately bringing Joseph to power in Egypt.

In the ancient world, the positions of cupbearer and baker were important positions, because a common way to assassinate a king was to poison his food or drink. So the offices of cupbearer and baker were high offices in Pharaoh's court. They were trusted officials, almost like cabinet members, and the Pharaoh would sometimes consult these men about matters other than food and drink as well.

These important officials were put under Joseph's care in the royal prison. *"So he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison, the place where Joseph was confined. And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he served them; so they were in custody for a while"* (v3-40).

Who was the "captain of the guard"? Genesis 39:1 says, *"Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there."* So it seems that among his other duties, Potiphar was in charge of this royal prison. This was probably a key factor in Joseph's position in the prison, and it may also be an additional indication that Potiphar never really believed his wife's false accusation against Joseph.

God gave dreams to Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker: *"We each have had a dream, and there is no interpreter of it"* (v8). They couldn't ask the wise men and the sorcerers of Egypt, who would normally interpret their dreams, because they were confined in prison. But Joseph offered to interpret their dreams.

Notice that Joseph first gave credit to God! *"Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please."* Then Joseph proceeded to interpret their dreams - and his interpretations proved to be true. Three days later the butler was restored to his position as cupbearer to Pharaoh, and the baker was hanged - in exact accordance with Joseph's interpretation.

Doctrinal Points

1. God's servants should serve in good situations and in bad situations.

Joseph was a good servant when things were going well for him in Potiphar's house, and he was a good servant when he was thrown into prison. Verse 4: *"And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he served them; so they*

were in custody for a while.” And verse 7, “So he asked Pharaoh’s officers who were with him in the custody of his lord’s house, saying, “Why do you look so sad today?”

If Joseph had been bitter and only concerned about himself, he probably would not have even noticed that Pharaoh’s officers looked sad, or cared enough to ask them about it. But Joseph was concerned about others. He had a servant’s heart, and he served in both good situations and bad situations. Even when the butler forgot all about him after Joseph had specifically asked him to remember him, Joseph didn’t wallow in self-pity. He continued to serve others in prison. There are always opportunities to serve! Sure, it’s a lot easier to serve the Lord in good and pleasant situations, right? I think of my own situation right now. Most of the day I serve the Lord in a Bible college classroom with Christian students. That may not sound very exciting to you, but it’s exciting for me, because I **love** the classroom! It’s easy to serve the Lord in a situation like that!

But now I’m thinking of a Christian couple in western China. They’re serving the Lord with Operation Mobilization in a very difficult and dangerous situation, where there is persecution and peril. During the winter they have to hang blankets over the windows of their home just to try to stay warm. They eat cabbage and rice as a steady diet. There is loneliness and poverty. It’s not a pleasant situation, but this couple is serving the Lord faithfully - without complaining, and without doubting God’s goodness. What a rebuke and challenge to many of us! God’s servants should serve in good situations and bad situations.

2. God’s servants should share the good news and the bad news.

It was easy for Joseph to share the good news with the butler: “And Joseph said to him, “This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days. Now within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your place, and you will put Pharaoh’s cup in his hand according to the former manner, when you were his butler” (v12-13). That was very good news, and it was easy to share.

But what about the news that Joseph had to give the baker? “This is the interpretation of it: The three baskets are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head from you and hang you on a tree; and the birds will eat your flesh from you” (v18-19). That was extremely unpleasant news, but as God’s servant Joseph had to share the bad news and the good news.

God’s servants should share the good news that God loves us, that He has provided salvation for us in Christ, and that salvation is free! But the bad news is that if you don’t trust in Jesus Christ as your only way of salvation, then according to the Word of God, you are under the judgment of God, and the wrath of God continues to abide upon you. You will face God’s judgment, and there is an eternal hell. John 3:36 says, “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

Some of you know that after I left the field of science and engineering, I worked for a few years with Young Life, an evangelical ministry reaching out to high school youth. At first I was only sharing the “good” side of the truth with the kids, and guess what - lots of kids came out to my Young Life Club! But I was not presenting the other side of the story. Now I’m not prone to dramatic dreams, but one night I had a very dramatic dream. In the dream I saw an escalator hanging in mid-air. It was going down, and lots of teens were on the escalator. They were partying and having a great time. They didn’t realize that they were going to fall off the end of the escalator and drop off into the abyss of hell. They couldn’t see what was coming. In my dream I was trying to get across the message to them: “Get off before it’s too late!” But somehow I couldn’t communicate. Suddenly one of the girls got caught in the mechanism at the end of the escalator, and was dangling there by her arm. She could see and hear the cries of the kids as they fell into the abyss, and she looked straight at me and said, “Preach the Cross!”

I don’t know if God specifically sent this dream or not, but I can tell you one thing - God definitely **used** this dream in my life! From that time on I began to present the “bad news” of God’s judgment as well as the “good news” of God’s wonderful plan of salvation! God’s servants should share the good news and the bad news.

Practical Application

Let’s not have a memory like the butler’s memory!

Verse 23: *“Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.”*

Did the butler *really* forget Joseph - or did he “conveniently” forget? Chances are, it was convenient for him to forget Joseph. He was too busy to remember that Hebrew slave in prison. He was too important to waste his time trying to get Joseph out of prison. In fact, perhaps his own position in the palace would be jeopardized if he tried to get a Hebrew slave released from prison! So he conveniently forgot Joseph.

Do we conveniently forget people? Many applications could be given here. Have you “conveniently” forgotten to call someone whom you promised to call? Have you “conveniently” forgotten to pay back a loan that you owe, or return a tool or a book that you borrowed? What about prayer? Have you promised to pray for someone, but you have forgotten?

Yesterday afternoon I got a call from a Christian friend who asked for prayer for someone to whom he would be witnessing last night. I said, “Yes, I’ll pray for your friend” - but I almost forgot! Here’s a good idea: every time you agree to pray about something, write it down on a card, just like you write down all those other things that you have to do. Then consult your prayer cards frequently!

So when you promise to do something or pray for someone, don’t forget! Let’s not have a memory like the butler’s memory.