

# Pipe Dreams

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*"Joseph explaining his dreams to the Pharaoh"*

## Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone.  
Let the heavenly food of the scripture we are about to hear  
nourish us today in the ways of eternal life,  
through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.

## Old Testament Reading: Genesis 40:1-23 (NRSVue)

Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker offended their lord the king of Egypt. <sup>2</sup> Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, <sup>3</sup> and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. <sup>4</sup> The captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he waited on them, and they continued for some time in custody. <sup>5</sup> One night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt who were confined in the prison—each his own dream and each dream with its own meaning. <sup>6</sup> When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. <sup>7</sup> So he asked Pharaoh's officers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast

today?"<sup>8</sup> They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me."

<sup>9</sup> So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me,<sup>10</sup> and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out, and the clusters ripened into grapes.<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days;<sup>13</sup> within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer.<sup>14</sup> But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place.

<sup>15</sup> For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon."

<sup>16</sup> When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head,<sup>17</sup> and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head."<sup>18</sup> And Joseph answered, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days;<sup>19</sup> within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a pole, and the birds will eat the flesh from you."

<sup>20</sup> On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants.<sup>21</sup> He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand,<sup>22</sup> but the chief baker he hanged, just as Joseph had interpreted to them.<sup>23</sup> Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph but forgot him.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – "Pipe Dreams"

"Some time later."

"As time went on."

The King James translates it "and it came to pass." Joseph has been in Egypt, between Potiphar's palace and his present prison, for an indefinite period of time. But we can do some math to figure out how long:

Joseph has been in captivity for **eleven years**.

So in our scene, Joseph isn't a teenager. He's **twenty-eight years old**.

Twenty-eight years old! That “some time later” has been a long, long time of waiting. These are the hardest times to keep the faith and not give up hope when there’s no end in sight. These indefinite periods feel more like dog years than human years.

The chief cupbearer and chief baker for Pharaoh somehow got themselves into hot water with Pharaoh. They too found themselves in a pit. These two held influential positions in the government, especially the cupbearer. He had a position of trust. He was an advisor to Pharaoh. Somehow these two men offended the king, and can you guess whose temporary custody they were put under?... Joseph’s. Something significant is going to happen.

Well, one night, there were two dreams. Each prisoner had their own unique dream. Each had different meanings. *It’s interesting in Genesis, dreams usually come in pairs. There will be more of these double dreams to come.* Joseph came down to them the next morning and saw the cupbearer and the baker—they both had grim looks on their faces. “Why do you look sad?” “We both had dreams and there’s no one to interpret them.”

Egyptians were fascinated by dreams. And they had people who studied in dream schools. There were dream encyclopedias that gave definitions and instructions for symbols in dreams. These dream interpreters were paid for their services and the cupbearer and baker had no access to these professionals in prison. That’s why they were downcast.

Then for the first time, Joseph speaks about God.

“Dream interpretations are God’s business.” Please tell me your dreams.

Joseph the Dreamer is now Joseph the Dream Interpreter. His own dreams led to his misfortune. But other’s dreams are the beginning of his rise...*soon*...but not yet.

The chief baker was a little skeptical, but the chief cupbearer decided to give it a shot.

“There was a vine before me and there were three branches on the vine. Then time sped up, and before my very eyes the branches budded, blossomed, and the grape clusters immediately ripened. Suddenly I found Pharaoh’s cup in my hand. I took the juicy grapes, pressed them into Pharaoh’s cup, then returned Pharaoh’s cup into his hand.”

Joseph paused for a moment, closed his eyes, then spoke with clarity.

“Here’s the meaning: There’s a theme of threes here. Three branches are three days. Within three days, Pharaoh will lift your head and restore you to office. Dignity, honor, and independence will be returned to you. You shall once again place Pharaoh’s cup in your hand. Relief came over the cupbearer.”

I have a request. I don’t need money for this interpretation. But I need your help. Remember me when you are restored. Show me kindness, show me *chesed*, by mentioning to Pharaoh my plight. I’ve been kidnapped from my homeland. I’ve done nothing wrong to be stuck in this pit all these years. Remember me, don’t forget me, I want out of here.

Well the chief baker liked Joseph’s favorable interpretation, so his skepticism melted away. Sure his dream was a little darker than the cupbearer’s, but he thought to himself, “what the heck?”

"There were three baskets on my head. The uppermost basket had all kinds of baked foods. (Egyptians were known for their bread—in fact they had at least 57 different kinds of bread and 38 kinds of cake). Birds swooped down and began eating out of the basket on my head. There was nothing I could do to drive them away."

Notice the baker didn't prepare the bread, and he didn't serve the bread to Pharaoh. Pharaoh wasn't even in the dream.

Again Joseph closed his eyes, paused a moment, and then clearly spoke:

"Here is the meaning of the threes. The three baskets are three days. Within three days the king will lift up your head...from your body and hang you on a pole. Birds will eat your flesh."

The chief baker's face turned ghost white.

Egyptians had not only a great respect for dreams, they respected the dead. They mummified their dead to honor and preserve them. And this kind of death was particularly horrific to an Egyptian.



## ON THE THIRD DAY.

*Did you notice that phrase in our scripture? Whenever you hear "on the third day" in the Bible, in both testaments, something significant is going to happen.*

On the third day Pharaoh threw a birthday bash for himself and his palace servants. It was not uncommon on these special days that rulings were made. Sure enough, the chief cupbearer and chief baker were summoned by Pharaoh.

He lifted the head of the cupbearer and the baker—meaning he noticed them, singled them out. The cupbearer was restored to his previous position and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hands. The baker, however, was decapitated and placed on a pole. Just as Joseph interpreted. And the cupbearer...never gave Joseph a thought. Forgot all about him. Nothing changed for Joseph. He was *still* in prison. Will anything go well for this poor guy? We all want to be remembered.

Years later, there was another prisoner in the Bible who wanted to be remembered. The thief was on a cross, next to Jesus.

*"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

*"Truly I tell you," said Jesus from his cross, "today you will be with me in paradise."*

Jesus remembered the repentant thief.

The kindness of our Savior remembers us in our suffering and stuckness. We are not forgotten, even when we feel forsaken. Even Jesus felt this. What did he also say on the cross?

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

But we know God came through, God remembered his Son. He answered the crucifixion with resurrection. On what day? *The third day.*

In Christ, we too are a resurrection people. But we still must go through a crucifixion.

## REMEMBER

Unlike Jesus, the cupbearer didn't remember. In his joy, Joseph completely slipped his mind...for a season. We all look to God's *chesed*, God's loving-kindness. But we must extend that *chesed*, that kindness to our fellow human beings. We're made in God's image. God is kind, and so we're designed to be kind to others. To show mercy. To remember. Remembering our neighbor, the person in need, is a holy calling. A divine expectation of us.



There's a great story found in a Jewish folktale about King Solomon that can help us in times when we feel stuck and forgotten. —

One day the king put a challenge to his most trusted minister Benaiah.

"Benaiah, there's a certain ring that I want you to bring to me and you have six months to find it."

"If it exists anywhere on earth, your majesty," replied Benaiah, "I will find it and bring it to you, but what makes the ring so special?"

"It has magic powers," answered the king. "It will steady you through good times and bad times. If a happy man looks at it, he becomes sad, and if a sad man looks at it, he becomes happy."

Spring passed and then summer, and still Benaiah had no idea where he could find the ring. On the night before the king expected the ring, Benaiah decided to take a walk in one of the poorest quarters of Jerusalem. He passed by a merchant who had begun to set out the day's wares on a shabby carpet. "Have you by any chance heard of a magic ring that makes the happy wearer forget his joy and the broken-hearted wearer forget his sorrows?" asked Benaiah.

He watched the grandfather take a plain gold ring from his carpet and engrave something on it. When Benaiah read the words on the ring, his face broke out in a wide smile. He bought the ring and brought it to the king the next day.

"Well, my friend," said Solomon, "have you found what I sent you after?" All the ministers laughed and Solomon himself smiled.

To everyone's surprise, Benaiah held up a small gold ring and declared, "Here it is, your majesty!"

As soon as Solomon read the inscription, the smile vanished from his face. The jeweler had engraved this phrase on the ring:

***"This too will pass."***

At that moment Solomon realized that all his wisdom and fabulous wealth and tremendous power were but fleeting things, for one day he would be nothing but dust."

***... This too will pass."***

The Father runs to us, his downcast and prodigal child, and puts a golden ring on our finger. When we're still stuck in the pit and feel forgotten, we look at the ring lovingly slid onto our finger: ***This too will pass.***

Nothing is forever—even the pit or exile we find ourselves in. When you're grounded in what's most important. When you remember how wonderful, yet how fleeting this life is, you're free. At peace. You have a steadiness. A stick-to-it-ive-ness. Faithfulness. Perseverance, through the mountaintops and the valleys.

***This too will pass.***

And next week, we will see that there is indeed the prison and pit will pass for Joseph.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Joseph explaining his dreams to the Pharaoh," detail from a decorative mosaic, St. Mark's Basilica, Venice. Italy, 11th-13th century.

---

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible, copyright © 2021 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.