

the chief butler

Genesis 40:2-41:16

40:2 And Pharaoh was wroth against two of his officers, against **the chief of the butlers**, and against the chief of the bakers. **40:3** And he put them in ward in the house of the captain of the guard, into the prison, the place where **Joseph** was bound. **40:4** And the captain of the guard charged **Joseph** with them, and he served them: and they continued a season in ward. **40:5** And they dreamed a dream both of them, each man his dream in one night, each man according to the interpretation of his dream, **the butler** and the baker of the king of Egypt, which were bound in the prison. **40:6** And **Joseph** came in unto them in the morning, and looked upon them, and, behold, they were sad. **40:7** And he asked Pharaoh's officers that were with him in the ward of his lord's house, saying, Wherefore look ye so sadly to day? **40:8** And they said unto him, We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it. And **Joseph** said unto them, Do not interpretations belong to God? tell me them, I pray you. **40:9** And **the chief butler** told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, In my dream, behold, a vine was before me; **40:10** And in the vine were three branches: and it was as though it budded, and her blossoms shot forth; and the clusters thereof brought forth ripe grapes: **40:11** And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand: and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand. **40:12** And **Joseph** said unto him, This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days: **40:13** Yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head, and restore thee unto thy place: and thou shalt deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner when thou wast his butler. **40:14** But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house:

40:21 And he [*Pharaoh*] restored **the chief butler** unto his butlership again; and he gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand: **40:22** But he hanged the chief baker: as Joseph had interpreted to them. **40:23** Yet did not **the chief butler** remember Joseph, but forgot him.

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41:9 Then spake **the chief butler** unto Pharaoh, saying, I do remember my faults this day: **41:10** Pharaoh was wroth with his servants, and put me in ward in the captain of the guard's house, both me and the chief baker: **41:11** And we dreamed a dream in one night, I and he; we dreamed each man according to the interpretation of his dream. **41:12** And there was there with us a young man, an Hebrew, servant to the captain of the guard; and we told him, and he interpreted to us our dreams; to each man according to his dream he did interpret. **41:13** And it came to pass, as he interpreted to us, so it was; me he restored unto mine office, and him he hanged. **41:14** Then Pharaoh sent and called **Joseph**, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon: and he shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh. **41:15** And Pharaoh said unto **Joseph**, I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it: and I have heard say of thee, that thou canst understand a dream to interpret it. **41:16** And **Joseph** answered Pharaoh, saying, It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace.

God's butler?

Pharaoh's chief butler played a key role in Joseph becoming the prime minister of Egypt. Yet, this is one of the few Bible studies you will ever find on him as a person and about the important work that he did. God used him! So he should be studied.

negatives

Though Joseph was falsely accused and imprisoned without a just cause (40:15), the same is not true of Pharaoh's chief butler. He and the chief baker did something (probably together) that enraged the king of Egypt (40:1-2). Even the butler himself admitted that such was the case (41:9).

Though we do not know what he did wrong, there are various indications in the passage that the chief butler was far from perfect. Most famously, he forgot all about Joseph for two full years (40:23-41:1). Though this was part of God's plan, it does not speak well of the butler's character.

Social, racial, and religious prejudices against the Hebrews are probably evident in the chief butler's words. To him, Joseph was first of all just a young Hebrew slave (41:12a). Only secondarily was Joseph spoken of as a special person who could somehow interpret dreams (41:12b).

Moreover, by giving Joseph all the credit for the correct dream interpretations (41:13), the butler failed to mention God. Joseph himself always gave the Lord credit (40:8, 41:16, 25), but the butler did not.

Most, but not all, of the lines below are correct or partly correct.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

| A | () The chief butler was NOT special. |
|------|---|
| A-1 | () His name is not recorded. |
| A-2 | () He was self-centered (40:23, 41:9). |
| A-3 | () He was Pharaoh's bartender (40:9-13). |
| A-4 | () His position was insecure (40:2, 41:9-13). |
| A-5 | () He is not the main character in the passage. |
| A-6 | () He was not able to interpret the dreams (40:5-8). |
| A-7 | () There is no indication that he believed in the Lord. |
| A-8 | () He forgot about Joseph for three years (40:23-41:1). |
| A-9 | () He is never mentioned in the Bible again after 41:9-13. |
| A-10 | () He is only mentioned because of his contact with Joseph. |
| A-11 | () He is only mentioned briefly in a few verses (40:1-23, 41:9-13). |
| A-12 | () There's no reason to believe he was a better person than the baker. |

positives

The chief butler had an important position in Pharaoh's house, which gave him direct and easy access to the king of Egypt. Thus he was in the right place at the right time to introduce Joseph to Pharaoh. Of course, he was also in the right place (in prison) to meet Joseph in the previous chapter as well.

Although the chief butler is not directly mentioned after the introduction in 41:12-13, he was probably one of Pharaoh's servants in 41:37-38. Also, he might have been among the king's servants who later joined the great funeral procession for Jacob. (See Gen. 50:7.)

The chief butler did not need to be special or even a believer in order to be useful to God. The same was true of Pharaoh as well. The Lord used them to assist Joseph in saving Israel and the Mediterranean world from the seven years of famine. The butler was not the main character, but God still used him.

Pharaoh and his servants were greatly impressed by Joseph's wisdom (41:37-41). Though it is unclear if any of them ever believed in the God of Israel, it is clear that Joseph had a powerful testimony before them. Some of the Egyptians may have believed later (50:7).

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

| B | () The chief butler was useful to God. |
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| B-1 | () Pharaoh trusted him (40:13). |
| B-2 | () He believed in Joseph's ability (41:9-13). |
| B-3 | () He was willing to admit his faults (41:9-10). |
| B-4 | () He had an excellent memory (40:14, 23, 41:1). |
| B-5 | () He said what God wanted him to say (40:14, 41:9-13). |
| B-6 | () He probably had a strong sense of God leading in his life. |
| B-7 | () He helped Joseph become prime minister (41:9-14, 37-41). |
| B-8 | () He was more useful to God than the chief baker (41:9-13). |
| B-9 | () His dream was more important than the chief baker's dream. |
| B-10 | () He was probably the only one in the palace who knew Joseph. |
| B-11 | () He had more direct access to Pharaoh than many other servants. |
| B-12 | () Maybe he eventually came to believe in the Lord (41:16, 50:7). |

conclusions

worksheet answers

The chief butler was more than a bartender (A, A-3, B-10). Though humanly speaking his position was insecure, his restoration was still a sure thing (A-4). Thanks to God, Pharaoh’s trust in him was restored (B-1), and he went on to help Joseph become prime minister (B-7). Apparently Pharaoh believed that the chief butler was more trustworthy than the chief baker (A-12). This may or may not have been correct. Even so, the fulfillment of the dreams of the two men were equally important (B-9).

As for the chief butler’s memory (B-4), his recollections of Joseph were accurate (41:12-13) even though he had selfishly forgotten about Joseph for two full years (A-2, A-8). This shows that memory and remembering involves more than just mental ability.

Despite being used by God (B), there is little to indicate that the butler believed in the Lord at first (A-7) or had a strong sense of God’s leading in his life (B-6). Perhaps he did later, however. Through Joseph’s testimony, he may have eventually come to believe in the God of Israel (B-12). The dream and subsequent execution of his friend, the baker, also may have impacted him greatly (41:10-13).

What if . . . ?

- ❶ What if the chief butler, but not the chief baker, had been put in prison? In that case, Joseph’s dream interpretation would not have been nearly as impressive. It may have even sounded like just a lucky guess.
- ❷ What if both the butler and the baker had been given positive dreams and interpretations so that both of them were restored to their positions? In that case, Joseph might have sounded like a false prophet who simply told the two men what they wanted to hear.
- ❸ What if the baker had told his dream to Joseph first? In that case, the prediction of the baker’s execution would have been given up front, and the butler may have been reluctant to ask Joseph about his own dream.
- ❹ What if the butler did not forget Joseph (40:23)? In that case, Joseph may have been released from prison much earlier, but he probably would never have become prime minister.
- ❺ What if we are so cautious about hypothetical questions that we never ask any? If we never ask about hypothetical things, we will never be able to fully appreciate the wonderful things that God really did.

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
