

The Third Day Phenomenon: Joseph's Story
Read Genesis 39-41

The king's cupbearer must squint to see in a murky dungeon lit up infrequently by a torch held by a jailor who daily brings days-old scraps from the king's house. Because he is in the king's dungeon, the cupbearer knows his food is superior to the foul grub in jails for common criminals. But, in comparison to the lavish banquets he is used to—*oh for the tasty morsels of the king's table*—this food makes him want to upchuck. He does not even know why he is here: *What did I say that made the king so angry with me?* Whatever the reason, his only hope is a man named Joseph, who claims to have from his god, the gift of dream interpretation.

Mud, ever present on the floors of the dungeon in the rainy season, squished over Joseph's sandals as he stepped toward two anxious men, a cupbearer and a baker. They recently were tossed into the dungeon by an irate king. Joseph was responsible for all those incarcerated, particularly for those who had been a part of the king's household. "I too am a prisoner," he once confided to a fellow prisoner. "But several years ago, it became obvious to the chief jailor that my God was with me. And perhaps he believed my story, that I was accused falsely of molesting the wife of Potiphar, the king's bodyguard. So," Joseph explained, "I've been put in charge down here." When Joseph heard, therefore, that the cupbearer and the baker were disturbed, he sought them out.

"Why are you so upset?" he said.

The cupbearer pushed himself up from his squatting position against the wall to answer. In the light of Joseph's torch, he looked at the baker and received confirmation that he should proceed first. "We have both had dreams that have so alarmed us that we can't sleep," he said.

"Don't interpretations belong to God?" Joseph asked, "Go on; tell me about it, please."

The cupbearer gazed into the dark shadows of the prison, recalling the details of his dream. "There was a vine with three branches in front of me," he began, his voice becoming less hesitant as he proceeded. "Buds started to bloom which became ripe grapes that I took to squeeze into Pharaoh's cup, and then I handed the cup to him."

As the cupbearer's eyes turned back toward Joseph in expectation, Joseph revealed the interpretation: "The three branches are three days. At the end of three days, Pharaoh will lift up your head to reinstate you as cupbearer, and you will put a cup of wine into his hand." Joseph continued with a voice that grew more distressed as he pleaded, "When this happens, don't forget to mention me to Pharaoh. I'm here because I was kidnapped from my country, and then accused of something I never did."

Alongside the cupbearer, the baker arose, hoping for an equally promising interpretation. Disregarding Joseph's anguish, he blurted out his dream. "Three baskets filled with an assortment of baked goods for the Pharaoh sat atop my head. Birds, however, devoured all that was in the baskets."

"Your head will also be lifted up in three days," Joseph said with dismay to the baker, "for the baskets symbolize the three days. But unlike the cupbearer, your head will be lifted up for hanging."

On the third day, Joseph's prophecy was satisfied—the cupbearer received life, the baker death. Joseph, on the other hand, remained in jail, forgotten by the cupbearer.

Something the men in the palace hall are gossiping about jiggles in the cupbearer's mind and a memory finally surfaces. *Joseph! I've forgotten Joseph!* Hearing about the Pharaoh's troubling dream brings back to him the circumstances from two years before. Now the Pharaoh is demanding that his own dream be interpreted. The cupbearer breaks free of the men to rush off to the king: *I've got to go and tell the Pharaoh about Joseph. His interpretation of my dream gave me back my life.*

It was the cupbearer's testimony of what occurred on the third day that resulted in Joseph's deliverance from prison. These third-day circumstances, scattered through the Scriptures, lead up to the dramatic third-day event of Christ's resurrection. Thus, the meaning of Paul's statement--that Christ was prophesied to rise on the third day--is understood in light of Old Testament narratives, like Joseph's, which deal with extraordinary happenings on the third day.