

Abundance and Famine, Part 1: Prepare

A sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

17 November, 2024

Children's Talk: Of Cows and Corn

Our story today is about Cows and Corn, and what is strong and what is weak. What do you think is stronger: love or hatred? Love is of course! But it doesn't always seem like it. Here is a story from the Lord's Word about a dream and what seems strong.

Then it came to pass, at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh had a dream; and behold, he stood by the river. Suddenly there came up out of the river seven cows, fine looking and fat; and they fed in the meadow. Then behold, seven other cows came up after them out of the river, ugly and gaunt, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the river. And the ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven fine looking and fat cows. So Pharaoh awoke. He slept and dreamed a second time; and suddenly seven heads of grain came up on one stalk, plump and good. Then behold, seven thin heads, blighted by the east wind, sprang up after them. And the seven thin heads devoured the seven plump and full heads. So Pharaoh awoke, and indeed, it was a dream. (Genesis 41:1-7)

If you saw seven healthy cows and seven ugly, skinny cows, which do you think would survive longer? Which would be stronger? The healthy ones! If you saw seven healthy heads of grain and seven sickly and thin heads of grain, which do you think would survive longer? Which would be stronger? The healthy ones! But is that what happened in the dream? No. The strong and the healthy were destroyed by the weak and sickly. And the weak and sickly were just as weak and sickly afterwards as before. Why would this be?

Pharaoh could not understand, but a young man named Joseph could interpret or explain the meaning of dreams. He said that Pharaoh's dream meant:

Indeed seven years of great plenty will come throughout all the land of Egypt; but after them seven years of famine will arise, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine will deplete the land. So the plenty will not be known in the land because of the famine following, for it will be very severe. (Genesis 41:30-31)

The famine would be so bad that they forgot all about the time when they had plenty to eat. It didn't matter that they had year after year of good food from the Lord. It

would all be forgotten, just like the thin cows ate the fat ones and the sickly grain ate the healthy.

Good things have a way of being wiped away by bad things. Think of what you love about a friend: it seems so good! But if they start to be annoying, all that good stuff is forgotten and all you can remember is the bad things in them.

In the end good is stronger than evil; but it often feels like evil is much stronger.

When we are mad, nothing is good. When we are upset, we can hardly remember what it was like to be happy.

That's a bit like Pharaoh's dream and its meaning. But Joseph gave Pharaoh a plan: when they had plenty to eat, they should put some of it aside. Then, when there was nothing to eat, they could pull out the old food from when times were good and eat that. We can do a similar thing. We can put aside some of our thoughts and feelings when times are good, and then remember them when everything seems really bad or hard. What are some of those things that you want to remember and to be grateful for, that might be nice to remind yourself of when life seems really bad?

It will be hard to remember those things. It really does seem like negative and hard feelings are stronger than good ones. But that's not true at all. The Lord's love and goodness is stronger than anything in the universe, and if we remember it we can overcome anything.

Abundance and Famine, Part 1: Prepare

A sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

17 November, 2024

We all go through times of abundance and times of famine; times of great joy, happiness and blessings and times of sadness, despair, and hardship. As people it is easy to focus most on what we are going through right now: if things are good, how could I ever be unhappy or doubt ever again? I'm so blessed! I've made it! Or the flipside: if things are bad, then they will be bad forever; there is no hope or joy; and any indication otherwise is a false hope. But the Lord does not want this for us. There is a better way. We don't have to wait helplessly for the good times to end and the bad times to overcome us. The Lord calls us to prepare during the times of abundance so that we can persevere through the times of hardship. Hard times are guaranteed, we can't avoid them; so instead of ignoring the hard times that are coming our way, how do we prepare for them before they even arrive?

7 Years of Plenty, 7 Years of Famine

We're going to use the story of Pharaoh's dreams as the basis for what the Lord tells us about this process. Joseph, the Hebrew prisoner, explained that the dream of the seven healthy cows and stalks being consumed by the seven sickly ones was a prediction of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. But more important than a mere prediction, Joseph indicated that the dream was a message from God to not squander the plenty that they would enjoy, but to make sure that they took the opportunity to prepare for the coming lack. Joseph told Pharaoh:

Indeed seven years of great plenty will come throughout all the land of Egypt; but after them seven years of famine will arise, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine will deplete the land. So the plenty will not be known in the land because of the famine following, for it will

be very severe. And the dream was repeated to Pharaoh twice because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass. Now therefore, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh do this, and let him appoint officers over the land, to collect one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven plentiful years. And let them gather all the food of those good years that are coming, and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities. Then that food shall be as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which shall be in the land of Egypt, that the land may not perish during the famine.” (Genesis 41:29-36)

There is within this message the promise of both great abundance and of great lack, and the urging to do something with the abundance such that the lack would not be felt so strongly.

Let’s start with the first half: a promise of great abundance followed by great lack. The Lord is warning that they should not take the abundance for granted. It would not last for forever. This is really important for us to remember as well. No matter how good life is right now, there are challenges that will come our way. A useful phrase to remember is that “this too shall pass.” It’s a good reminder when times are hard, of course, that the hard times won’t last for forever; but it applies just as well to good times: it won’t last for forever; this too shall pass. There’s a useful analogy with finances: think of someone who has finally gotten to the point that he can afford all his expenses with a little extra left over. But just because he can afford everything he needs right now does not mean he always will be able to. What if he loses his job or has a medical emergency? He would be wise to start building up a savings account. If he just spends the extra income, he may be in for a rude awakening when something goes wrong and he has nothing to fall back on.

Spiritual Plenty, Spiritual Famine

But what are those spiritual times of plenty? What does it feel like to go through a spiritual famine? The times of plenty are not tied to material wellbeing of

course. The Lord urges us to lay up for ourselves treasure in heaven, not on earth. Those heavenly treasures aren't too hard to think of. What are the things in life that you most value? When you have those in abundance, times are good.

Likewise the hard times aren't about material challenges, although they can be connected. If someone is struggling financially, it might bring about a lot of doubt about self-worth and earning his keep. When tragedy strikes it's hard to keep trusting in God's Providence. Health issues make relationships a lot harder to focus on. Whatever the challenge might be I think the famine is that we don't feel like we have what it takes to face it, or what we do have isn't sufficient.

How Do You Prepare?

Now the problem with knowing that hard things will come is that we don't know what those hard things might look like. If we go back to the analogy with savings, you don't know what form financial trouble will take or how much it will cost. You can't put aside exactly as much as you need; you just have to put aside a reasonable amount of what you can afford and hope it will be enough. In the case of Joseph, his advice to pharaoh was to put aside one fifth of the produce of the land in preparation for what was to come. This specific amount has a deeper spiritual meaning, as explained in the Teachings of the New Church:

Therefore it has been shown that by a "fifth part" are signified goods and truths stored up in person by the Lord, and reserved for use when there shall be a famine, that is when there shall be a lack and deprivation of goodness and truth; for unless such things were stored up in a person by the Lord, there would be nothing to uplift him in a state of temptation and vastation, consequently nothing through which he could be regenerated; and thus he would be without the means of salvation in the other life. (*Secrets of Heaven* §5291)

When a person experiences an abundance of blessings, that is the time when goodness and truth are most noticeable and dependable. You see it and feel it and

trust that it is there. The Lord uses those strong, reliable experiences of goodness and truth to help us endure and persevere through the times when there is evil and doubt. In other words, the Lord stores up our experiences of goodness and truth for later use.

But we have a part to play in that storing up of good things. Just as Joseph put aside one fifth of the land's produce for later use, we can intentionally store up good and true things from our lives for use when life is hard. The work we do when things are good will better prepare us for when they aren't so good. There are probably a million ways we could, but I'll suggest just a few:

- Consciously write down what is good about life: who are the people you like, what do you like about them, what are the things you enjoy, what are the things that give meaning and purpose to your life, what are you good at, what are the things that you do that are useful for other people? When in despair or temptation, we easily forget these. We need something outside of our own minds to remind us and confirm that they are true, real, and worthwhile.
- Live what you know to be true: plant now so there will be a harvest later. When something is put into practice it sticks. The more you have a lived experience of doing what is right and good, the more you will be able to trust that it is right even when flooded with doubts. Things like honesty, integrity, kindness, trustworthiness, charity, commitment, and so on. The more you intentionally live these things now, the stronger they will remain when life is a real struggle.
- Strengthen relationships: with Lord, spouse, family, friends, community, colleagues, church, school, etc. These are the relationships that we will want to fall back on when we cannot seem to face anything on our own.

- Build spiritual habits: reading the Word, prayer, attending church, reflecting on spiritual things, becoming more part of a church community. These practices keep us connected to the Lord, and build a living relationship with Him. If we only pray when we absolutely have to, our prayer life will be stilted and not give us the strength we could have from it.
- Practice gratitude. Perhaps one of the best ways to not take good things for granted is to continuously express gratitude, even for the little things.

As I said, there are many things beyond these that we can do. What matter is that you do something.

Some people are planners, and get so caught up in preparing that they forget about experiencing life right now. Squirrel away the one fifth; but consume the other four fifths. Consider the classic tale of a miser who never spends a penny, and dies rich but never having done anything with his money. Or for the teens, compare it with never using a potion in an RPG, always with the notion of saving it for when I really need it. At the end of the game, the inventory is packed with useless items. Those would have come in handy earlier if I'd actually put them to use.

Finally, don't get caught up in getting these practices "right" or preparing for the "right" kind of challenge. We cannot see the future. No amount of preparation will prevent the need to endure and persevere. Joseph prepared Egypt; the famine still happened. Noah prepared a boat; the flood still came. Jesus prepared the disciples for His death; they still had to endure losing Him in the Crucifixion. We prepare so that we can persevere through hardship, not so that we will avoid hardship. As long as we are building up a store of goodness and truth, the Lord will make sure we are prepared. The Lord has already foreseen all the evil coming your way, and He has already begun providing you with the good that will counter it:

In every present moment the Lord foresees evil, and provides good; and this He does from the first thread of life even to eternity. (*Secrets of Heaven* §9296)