

Scripture Reading: Genesis 41:

“25 Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do: 26 The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads are seven years; the dreams are one. 27 And the seven thin and ugly cows which came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty heads blighted by the east wind are seven years of famine. 28 This is the thing which I have spoken to Pharaoh. God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do. 29 Indeed seven years of great plenty will come throughout all the land of Egypt; 30 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. 31 So the plenty will not be known in the land because of the famine following, for it will be very severe. 32 And the dream was repeated to Pharaoh twice because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass. 33 “Now therefore, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. 34 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. 35 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. 36 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.” 37 So the advice was good in the eyes of Pharaoh & in the eyes of all his servants. 38 And Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?” 39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you.”

“Joseph is Given Power”

“Well after an extended season of Advent, Christmas and guests in our pulpit, we are back in the Book of Beginnings which I plan to finish in this year of our Lord 2017! Since it has been over two months, perhaps just a bit of review is in order: Genesis is the Book of Beginnings because it is here where we see God revealing His Creation: Including man who is made in His image & tasked with the care & dominion of the earth. We also find here the fall of man and the sinfulness of sin which, when unchecked, resulted in the destruction of all things living in the Great Flood.

- **And most importantly we see God’s promised plan of salvation announced in the Garden and carried out in history with faithful men like Abel, Noah, and Abraham.**

A salvation that is to be found only in the coming Messiah, Jesus, our Savior Who we are to see everywhere in the Old Testament! As we approach the closing chapters of this important book, we have come to the life of Joseph, but we must remember that his life comes in the context of the life of his father Jacob. At the beginning of chapter 37 as Joseph is introduced we read, ‘these are the generations of Jacob’ and we will find the death and burial of Jacob in the final chapters of Genesis, where he blesses his sons who will become the nation of Israel, the keepers of God’s revelation and the line of promise! A nation which must now sojourn in Egypt for about 400 years as God had explained to Abraham years before. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, an evil act which God used to bring deliverance to His people.

- **This is why the imagery surrounding Joseph gives us so many instructions about the coming Messiah Jesus!**

Joseph prospered as a slave, but then was betrayed and imprisoned where he prospered again, & then was forgotten. Finally the dreams of Pharaoh have brought the memory of Joseph back to the King’s cup bearer and Joseph is brought before the King to interpret those troubling dreams. Now we will see Joseph greatly exalted just as Jesus was after His time of suffering at the hands of wicked men.

Joseph's story was celebrated in Psalm 105 where we read in part:

“Moreover He called for a famine in the land; He destroyed all the provision of bread. 17 He sent a man before them— Joseph—who was sold as a slave. 18 They hurt his feet with fetters, He was laid in irons. 19 Until the time that his word came to pass, The word of the Lord tested him. 20 The king sent and released him, The ruler of the people let him go free. 21 He made him lord of his house, And ruler of all his possessions, 22 To bind his princes at his pleasure, And teach his elders wisdom.”

And of course it is a grand picture of how the Lord Jesus was lifted up as Peter explained to a rebellious group of religious leaders in Acts chapter 5:

“30 The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. 31 Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”

The hated brother, who endured slavery and imprisonment, will now be exalted and his life is not only an early example of the life of Jesus, but an example for us as well:

Romans 5: “5 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

So now Joseph is exulted and our text gives us some interesting food for thought that will carry over into the coming weeks and some wisdom for people who live in the midst of prosperity, as we do here in our nation. I picked up a bit of the context of what we studied before Advent with regard to the King's dreams. Joseph gives God full credit for revealing the truth of these dreams and stresses that they are ONE dream: A strong warning about events that will shortly come to pass.

- **The King was greatly troubled by those fat healthy cows being eaten up by the ugly skinny cows who then looked no different!**

Now Joseph shows how they are to be understood and then gives advice, also from God, about how the King should handle the coming challenges.

33 “Now therefore, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. 34 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. 35 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. 36 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.”

Now before we come to the exaltation of Joseph let me quickly point out something that we should ponder, and will ponder in the coming weeks:

- **Why is there such a need for strong civil action?**

These are God's instructions so we cannot simply say that Joseph or Pharaoh were striving to gain more power, but that is certainly what happened in the end.

- **The simple answer would be to say that people would not have been responsible on their own, so the government had to step in and take care of them.**

I am not sure that we want that to be the only answer, so as I said, there is much to ponder as we move through this portion of Joseph's life.

In any case, the King is convinced that Joseph is God’s messenger and so we read at verse 37:

“So the advice was good in the eyes of Pharaoh & in the eyes of all his servants. And Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?” 39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you.” 41 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.”

- **Thus the forgotten imprisoned slave is to be seated at the King’s right hand and given all the authority and power in Egypt.**

And of course it is a foretaste of how the condemned heretic who was crucified is now seated at His Father’s right-hand having been given all power and authority on earth and in heaven! Here in Egypt, Potiphar, Joseph’s former master, must now bow before him and soon his own brothers will as well when they come seeking food and mercy!

In the same way we know that the ascension and seating of Jesus means that every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord! In the coming weeks we will consider the power of Joseph and how he wielded it in Egypt, but for this morning I want to focus on what I believe is an important bit of wisdom for a prosperous age like our own: I suspect that what we see in terms of how the civil authorities handle the coming crisis may challenge some or all of our American thinking these days...

In commenting on this portion of the Scriptures, John Calvin touches upon that issue and also reminds us about some of the shortcomings of prosperity and since we live in perhaps the most prosperous period in all of human history we should take note and meditate on what he shared: In verse 35 we saw Joseph suggest that all the food set aside for the years of famine must be “under the hand of Pharaoh,” or under his control. Why could they not simply tell people what God had revealed and explain to them that they need to make provision for the coming years of famine?

John Calvin offers these thoughts, “Whereas prosperity so intoxicates men, that the greater part make no provision for themselves against the future, but absorb the present abundance by intemperance; Joseph advises the King to take care that the country may have its produce laid up in store. Besides, the common people would also form themselves to habits of frugality, when they understood that this great quantity of corn was not collected in vain by the king, but that a remedy was hereby sought for some unwanted calamity. In Short, because luxury generally prevails in prosperity, and wastes the blessings of God, the bridle of authority was necessary⁶. This is the reason why Joseph directed that garners should be established under the power of the king and that corn should be gathered into them.”

I am sure we will have some ongoing discussions about the proper scope and power of the civil magistrate, but for this morning we should take away at least one important lesson from this account for our prosperous age.

I trust that we all remember well the warning given to the Children of Israel as they entered the Promised Land about forgetting God in the midst of the very blessings He was about to give them. They would conquer this land, live in cities they did not build, drink from wells they did not dig, live in houses full of good things and harvest from fields and vineyards they did not plant...

- **Much like Americans living today they would enjoy great blessings that came in large part through the sweat and toil of others!**

God warned them in Deuteronomy six to NOT forget God in the midst of those blessings.

We also know that as His priestly people they were to use those blessings to ministry to the rest of the world.

Sadly, they failed on both fronts...

- **And that is why Jesus has come with a New Covenant in His blood administered by the power of the Holy Spirit and He will not fail!**
- **But as the writer of Hebrews warns us over and over, we must not follow the bad example of those in the Old Covenant!**

We must keep God first and foremost, seeking first His Kingdom!

And yes, just as God did with Israel, all those other things will be added and we must continue to keep God first in the midst of those blessings: This relates to an important principle that we teach with regard to tithing:

- **Giving God the first fruits of our increase reminds us over and over again that ALL our blessings come from God and that we must keep our eyes on Him and not them!**

We are also told to use them wisely and that is where this account gives us something to ponder in this age of prosperity... Egypt must prepare for seven years of famine in the near future which will follow seven years of plenty... How much did God instruct them, through Joseph, to set aside?

So why 25%? Why not at least 50%? It is simple math right? Use half of what comes in the years of plenty and save half for the years of famine!

But God says they will have food enough for themselves and even some surrounding nations if just 25% is set aside. John Calvin suggested that this example would also have encouraged more private saving for the lean years which might be true... But you still have a whole lot more food being used in the years of plenty than was needed!

Now I want to suggest that we again have a couple of dangerous ditches to avoid in our Christian walk.

These people in the years of plenty would have consumed as much as three times more food than was needed for survival.

- **Was this wasteful or just a people enjoying the abundance of God's blessings?**

Well the ditch on the right is what I would call extreme austerity:

- **Figure out what is needed for simple survival and think that anything more is wasteful!**

This ditch was explained in detail by men like Ron Syder in his book, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger where he wanted anyone who had more than the average income of the world to feel guilty. [example of the rice farmers]

The other ditch is what I would call extreme consumption or what Francis Schaeffer called out as one of America's two great sins with the failure to practice the compassionate use of accumulated wealth.

- **As Christians we are to be those who use the blessings that God brings to us to bless others and to assist the poor and needy.**

So as we seek the proper balance in all of this in our Christian walk this account can be very helpful.

- **First and foremost, it should remind us about the importance of planning for the future!**

It is not hard to make the case that we have not done well on this front here in America:

We are now a debtor nation with some \$20 Trillion in debts the government will admit to up front...

We live in a state that has tens of billions of dollars in debt and we don't have a printing press. ☺

And yes our irresponsible elected officials have simply mirrored our personal choices because the numbers on personal debt are staggering as well:

- **The average family with credit card debts carries a balance of over \$16,000**
- **The average mortgage is almost \$173,000**
- **The average auto loan debt is \$28,535 and those with student loans have an average of \$49,042.**

Now such statistics are always subject to review, but even if they are wrong by a factor of ten, we are still in dire straits financially! As a people we have sadly NOT followed the simple economic advice given by R.C. Sproul Jr.:

- **Work hard and spend less than you make!**

OK, so I could launch into a hundred applications, but the important thing is for each of us look at where we are at and based on the wisdom we glean here assess what we might need to do better!

If you are in a place where you are enjoying God's blessings without the debt and the worries that many have, make sure that God is still at the center of your life and that you are sharing your blessings with others.

If you think you have yourself in a bad position, then put together a plan to put things right. What might seem impossible may not be as tough as we might at first think when you consider that these Egyptians were consuming at least three times what they needed.

- **I am sure that if someone said to them at the time, that they should reduce their budget a bit to help pay off some chariot loans, they would have insisted that they had already cut everything to the bone!**

This is where an outside set of eyes can sometimes be helpful and where we need to determine wants and needs. A good budget reveals where the money is going if we are honest... That cup of fancy coffee that we "need" on the way to work can run over \$100 per month. Eating a simple lunch out can run 2-3 hundred dollars per month. Thinking that we can "afford" that \$400 car payment does not take into account what it costs us in the long run.

- **The most important point is that we be honest with where we are at and where we should be!**

And finally if you happen to be one who is truly in financial trouble or need because of overwhelming circumstances you must not refuse to allow your life to be a blessing to others by NOT sharing such needs and allowing them to help!

In the coming weeks we will see Joseph use his new found power to prepare Egypt, & by extension his own family, for the tough years that lay ahead... He will use the power of the sword to do what responsible individuals should have done and it will come at a great price in the end.

- **There are many practical lessons for us to learn: So may we have the eyes to see and ears to hear those lessons!**

Communion Meditation: Isaiah 61

““The Spirit of Jehovah God is upon Me, Because Jehovah has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, 3 To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.””