

Seven Years of Plenty Dreaming of a Bright Future

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.
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***Indeed seven years of great plenty will come throughout all the land of Egypt;
but after them seven years of famine will arise. (Genesis 41:29-30).***

Dreams of a bright future. Who among us does not dream of a bright future? Filled with hope, we envision happy times with loved ones, ample resources at our disposal which allow us to be generous and to enjoy travel, good things for our children, blessed times with grandkids, a position of impact in our employment realm, or a successful entrepreneurial venture, a move to a new location surrounded by friends or family...

Then there's our spiritual realm. Who among us does not dream of heaven one day—at least somewhere in the back of our minds? Or do we hope for a time when a stronger version of ourselves has progressed past a troubling habit that plagues us? There can be dreams of a capable version of ourselves, working alongside others to contribute something vibrant and vital. There can be dreams of greater connectedness with the core people of our lives—growing old with a husband and wife, having fun and loving relationships with children or grandchildren, expanding the tribe of people we consider close friends. And there can be hope of the faithful and grateful person that we become, who feels devoted to and blessed by the Lord.

Joseph's Dreams. Joseph was a dreamer and a dream interpreter. His story is one of the most captivating narratives of the Old Testament. It started with two dreams of personal greatness, which got him in trouble with his brothers and even his parents: their sheaves of wheat bowing down to his sheaf (Genesis 37:5-7); the sun, moon, and stars bowing down to him (Genesis 37:9). Both dreams elicited jealousy and outrage at a seemingly arrogant younger brother, but in reality were a message and calling from the Lord about the impact that Joseph would later have.

As the story goes, Joseph's brothers did the terrible thing of selling him down to Egypt into slavery, and Joseph ended up in prison for something he didn't do. There he correctly interpreted the dreams of the chief butler and baker of Pharaoh, with the one restored to his position (the butler) and the other condemned (the baker) (Genesis 40:8-23).

It was the butler who facilitated the launch of Joseph to a position of great prominence in Egypt when he finally remembered his interpretive ability and offered to Pharaoh that Joseph could interpret *his* vivid and predictive dreams (Genesis 41:9-13). This brings us to the core Scriptural focus for today. As we heard, Pharaoh dreamed of seven fat cows devoured by seven "thin and ugly" cows, and seven good heads of grain also devoured by seven "withered, thin and blighted" heads of grain (Genesis 41:1-7, 17-24).

From the Lord Joseph predicted "seven years of great plenty" followed by "seven years of famine," and recommended that Pharaoh appoint someone to store up grain in the good years so that all could muscle through the bad ones to follow. And Joseph himself was selected, bringing to fulfillment his own dreams of being raised to prominence. (Genesis 41:25-41).

Seven years of plenty. Let's focus on one part of this incredible dream sequence, the seven years of great plenty. In a broad way they stand for all those dreams we have of a bright

future. The Writings or Heavenly Doctrines tell us that those years stand for “an act of providence” (*Arcana Caelestia* 5275). Further signaling the spiritual impact of these years, we learn that the seven years of plenty means “the state when a person is reformed and regenerated” (*Ibid.*). Right there, we have the Lord and ourselves coordinating and cooperating in the very thing that will bring the most important of our dreams to reality. We’re talking about salvation, and the ways in which the Lord in His providence leads us to heaven.

Let’s absorb for a time the impact of those seven years. There is great power also in the number seven. Seven means “things that are holy,” by which I hear things that contribute to our faith in the Lord and active cooperation with Him in the spiritual dimensions of life (see *Arcana Caelestia* 5265). So much of the “sevens” in the Word align with this: seven days of creation, symbolizing our regeneration or spiritual rebirth, the Sabbath or day of remembrance of the Lord and the path of salvation, seven lampstands or core truths shining light on our path, the seventy times seven measure of forgiveness we are to offer, standing also for the love that we pour forth into what matters most. Here, in this dream context, it’s that same measure of love and energy poured into our dreams—particularly our spiritual dreams, or the hope of salvation, the advanced version of ourselves that is more trusting, wiser, more capable of useful service, more focused on what matters most, more generous with our time and energy toward the happiness and needs of others, more blessed and more capable of being a source of blessing from the Lord.

These seven years are said to be seven years *of plenty*. That means there is abundance. Nothing is lacking, and everything we need is there for us to have a prosperous and good life. Note, however, that it’s not really about worldly things. We may have the income, the home, the conveniences of life that make us comfortable, all the food we need, opportunities for vacations and dinners out and nice clothes. Those could be blessings from the Lord, unless they become the sole focus, or unless they distract us from the things of spiritual life.

The seven years of plenty is really about the abundance of truth about spiritual life that is available to us. The Heavenly Doctrines calls these times of plenty “states when truth is multiplied” (*Arcana Caelestia* 5275). We learn in other places that “nothing is of greater importance to a person than knowing what the truth is” (*Arcana Caelestia* 794). This is because it’s the Lord’s tool that leads us to cooperate with Him and receive from Him all that He longs to give us. When we know our Lord, including His love and mercy and power and providential care, it can inspire our devotion. When we know His path that He sets before us, we can walk it as on a lighted path and learn by experience that it does indeed bring peace and happiness. When we know the destructiveness of evil and selfishness, and the influence of the hells in our lives, and the power of temptations, we can turn to the Lord with prayerful appeal for help to fight and repent.

This, then, is all about our faith and the strength of conviction that can come as a result of building it up by means of “the truths of faith,” intentionally and consistently (see *Arcana Caelestia* 5199). In the seven years of plenty, with all that is available to us within the Lord’s Word, and with all the ability within ourselves to learn and cooperate with the Lord, are we learning and cooperating? Are we focused, with the Lord on our regeneration, on the path of salvation that He consistently sets before us? That’s the holiness, the Sabbath, the seventy times seven energy and love we are to put into the things that matter most, during these years of plenty.

Storing One-Fifth of the Grain. We come, then, to the specific thing that Joseph recommended happen during that time of plenty. They were to reserve one-fifth of all the grain in those years of plenty, storing them away in storehouses, so that they could prepare for the seven years of famine to come.

A “fifth” has an amazing symbolism of its own. We learn that it stands for “preserving remnants [or remains], and preserving remnants is a gathering together and then storing away of forms of truth and good” (*Arcana Caelestia* 5291). Five here has the exact same symbolism as ten, connected with tithing, and with these “remains.” I like to think of these magical good things tucked away in our spirits by the Lord as the energy and sustenance we have, so that the right idea comes into our minds at just the right time, or a heavenly affection inspires us at a pivotal moment, helping us to be the wise and loving person we need to be.

Learning. While a lot of that is the Lord’s work, He does it through our agency. We store up, we learn, we focus our attention, we, to quote, “go to the Lord, learn the truths of the Word, and live by them” (*True Christian Religion* 347). This the Lord urges us to do. As we heard earlier in the service, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you” (John 6:27).

For a useful purpose. What does that look like? This truth, we learn further, is entirely for the sake of “a useful purpose” (*Arcana Caelestia* 5293). I love that. We are to learn for a purpose, we are to grow with usefulness as a goal. Listen to one more sentence that we heard earlier: “Consequently as is the nature of the purpose a person has in view, so is the nature of that person’s life” (*Ibid.*). We are designed by the Lord to be useful, to serve. And we are wise to invest in spiritual food from the Word, or wisdom from the Lord that most allows us to be useful from Him.

Paying attention to what works and what doesn’t. But the phrase, “for a useful purpose” is not only about active engagement in service to others. Useful learning is also about paying attention to what works and what doesn’t. We are to strive to put the Lord’s principles of truth into practice, or to avoid the things that He forbids, and to discover that they actually work. They lead to the bright future that we pray for. They bring us closer to others such that our relationships blossom. Doing all of this allows the Lord to store up remains within us.

Seven years of famine. The reason this is so important is that in so doing we are making provision for true spiritual growth. It comes in the form of our ability to weather the hard times that inevitably come: the seven years of famine. We may wish that seven years of plenty, dreams of happiness and peace and salvation are all that we will experience. But we know famine comes. Our own weaknesses surface and we contribute to sadness and hurt in ways we deeply regret. Events that are simply realities of our flawed world come up—sickness, loss of work, accidents and tragedies among them. Symbolically, the seven years of famine mean “an absence of truth,” “deprivation” of faith, “points of despair,” and “spiritual temptation” (*Arcana Caelestia* 5277-5280).

The good news is that there is a reservoir of faith and remains or remnant states, as well as ability from the Lord to endure. When those hard times come, the Lord would have us know that He is there, offering strength to overcome in temptation, providing hope in dark times, bringing really hard circumstances to a seemingly miraculous resolution, showing us a path forward when we’re at a Red Sea or in seemingly hopeless circumstances (Exodus 14:21-22),

and holding us gently as we walk through a valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). This is our part in drawing on what has been stored up, so that we can weather the symbolic years of famine and come out stronger than ever on the other side.

The Lord's providential care. This brings us to the final area of focus for today, which is the hand of the Lord's providence, and it is how we conclude our message for today. It appears so powerfully in the dream sequence which is our subject. Joseph's original dreams of greatness come true. Miraculously, and against all odds, he is raised to a position of great impact. What is symbolized is the dominance of our spiritual self over our natural lives. Joseph here represents the part of us that is most responsive to the Lord "ruling over" or governing from the Lord, all the choices and priorities of our day to day lives. This is, to quote from one passage, "the [setting in order of] all that is in the natural mind" (*Arcana Caelestia* 5288). And this is one of the highest goals of the Lord's providence—inspiring the spiritual part in us to be responsive to Him in all things of life.

So beautiful are Joseph's closing words to his brothers years in the future, after the whole family had moved down to Egypt. Upon the death of their father, and in the face of fear expressed by his brothers that Joseph would now seek retribution for their earlier evil actions toward him, he said,

"Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive." (Genesis 50:19-20)

We see an older man knowing the Lord's providential care, seeing how all the hardships in his own life had turned out for the very best. This is the way the Lord fulfills His covenant with each of us, working in His myriad ways to "lead us to a good end" (*Arcana Caelestia* 8455). And it is marvelous to behold when we can capture glimpses of it.

For us, the task at hand is fourfold. First, we are encouraged to dream of a bright future in terms of our spiritual lives. This entails learning about the blessings the Lord can offer, and placing our ardent prayers for those blessings to come true. Second, we gather and make provision, we care about the things that nourish our souls, and "endure to everlasting life" (John 6:27). Third, we endure the years of famine, doing the work of turning to the Lord, repenting as needed, making amends and growing in our faith through all that is hard. Fourth, we find ways to give the glory to the Lord, knowing and believing deeply in His loving providential care.

All of this is contained in those prophetic words uttered by Joseph, the dream interpreter, essentially about our dreams for a bright future:

"God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do..... Indeed seven years of great plenty will come throughout all the land of Egypt; but after them seven years of famine will arise.... Now therefore let Pharaoh...gather all the food of those good years that are coming, and store up grain..., that the land may not perish during the famine." (Genesis 41:25,29-30) **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: Genesis 41:17-36; *Arcana Caelestia* 5264:2, 5293.

Genesis 41

¹⁷ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph: "Behold, in my dream I stood on the bank of the river. ¹⁸ Suddenly seven cows came up out of the river, fine looking and fat; and they fed in the meadow. ¹⁹ Then behold, seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and gaunt, such ugliness as I have never seen in all the land of Egypt. ²⁰ And the gaunt and ugly cows ate up the first seven, the fat cows. ²¹ When they had eaten them up, no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were just as ugly as at the beginning. So I awoke. ²² Also I saw in my dream, and suddenly seven heads came up on one stalk, full and good. ²³ Then behold, seven heads, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprang up after them. ²⁴ And the thin heads devoured the seven good heads. So I told this to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me."

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 ^[c] 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."

***Arcana Caelestia* 5264:2**

[The words,] 'what God is doing' means what has been provided. [This is because] everything done by God, that is, by the Lord, constitutes His Providence. Every act of Providence is Divine, for it holds what is eternal and infinite within it. It holds what is eternal because its view is not limited by any beginning or end, and it holds what is infinite because its view comprehends simultaneously the entire whole within any specific part, and every specific part within the entire whole. All this is called 'Providence'; and because every single one of the Lord's acts holds what is eternal and infinite within it, no other expression than Providence exists to describe it.

***Arcana Caelestia* 5293**

'And let them gather all the food' means all things that have a useful purpose.... In the internal sense 'food' means, strictly speaking, those things which nourish a person's soul, that is, which nourish people when their bodily life is ended. For when this is ended their soul or spirit is living, and they no longer need material food as they did in the world; but they do need spiritual food, which consists in everything that has a useful purpose and everything leading to this. That which leads to what has a useful purpose is knowing what goodness and truth are;

and that which has such a purpose is the desire to realize these in actions. These are the things with which angels are nourished and which are therefore called spiritual and celestial foods.... The reason 'food' in the spiritual sense means everything that has a useful purpose is that people's entire knowledge, their entire understanding and wisdom, and so their entire will must have a useful purpose as its end in view. Consequently as is the nature of the purpose he or she has in view, so is the nature of his life. The truth that 'food' in the spiritual sense means everything with a useful purpose is evident from the following words spoken by the Lord,

Jesus said to the disciples, I have food to eat of which you do not know. The disciples said to one another, Has anyone brought Him anything to eat? Jesus said to them, My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work. John 4:32-34.

And elsewhere,

Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.... John 6:27.