

Seven Good Cows

Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, 'Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine. It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land. The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.' - Genesis 41:25-36

The Pharaoh wasn't getting much sleep. He was nervous and anxious about his dreams, about the future, about the decisions that needed to be made. For Joseph, however, the dreams are a clear call to action. Egypt needs to save food during the good years and then use that stored food during the lean years (Gen 41:25-36).

As we move into a time when congregations will not be able to gather in-person for many weeks, some congregational leaders aren't getting much sleep. They are worrying about the future, worrying about people in need, worrying about finances, and worrying about the decisions that need to be made. In this moment of anxiety, the story of Joseph and the Pharaoh can provide guidance for whether or not a congregation should use financial reserves to support the congregation's ministry.

Joseph's direction to the Pharaoh is clear. During the lean year, use the food to feed the people. If God and God's people have generously blessed your congregation with resources and financial reserves during the good years, then don't hesitate to tap those reserves if COVID-19 leads to a lean year for your congregation. God's people gave generously and allowed your congregation to lay up financial resources and now, if your congregation experiences a lean year, know that the generosity and stewardship of God's people in the past has blessed you with the ability to continue your ministry uninterrupted. As Joseph counseled Pharaoh centuries ago, being a good steward when you are abundantly blessed can prepare you for those times of scarcity.

Now let me be clear - I am not advocating hoarding cash when times are good. As the Israelites discovered when they started hoarding manna in the wilderness - hoarding stinks. Nor am I suggesting that congregations continue to act as if nothing has happened. We will absolutely need to make wise and tough financial decisions in the weeks to come, but I am suggesting that we should be at peace about tapping your financial reserves or our 'rainy day' funds if those funds are needed to allow your congregation to continue to share God's love with an anxious and hurting world.

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