

## Living Sustainably | Sarah Gleave | Genesis 41:1-40

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### Introduction

The other day our supermarket delivery had arrived, and it was the usual situation in our house. A sudden bounty of food, and a slight feeling of panic over whether I would find a place to store it all. As I was stocking the fridge, I started to wonder if it would all fit in until I found myself trying to cram the broccoli into any last remaining space that I could find, and wondering if perhaps I needed another fridge to store all our food. And then I found myself wondering, "Am I just like the rich fool in Jesus' parable?"

You may be wondering what this has to do with the story of Joseph but hopefully it will become clear. So far in Joseph's story up to this point we've seen him imprisoned, kidnapped, enslaved, gained favour only to lose it, falsely accused, imprisoned again, gained favour again but then forgotten. But every story has a turning point, and this is it. Everything so far in Joseph's story has been leading up to this moment. This is the crux of the story, the end of the hardship for Joseph and the beginning of redemption. From this point on the trajectory is upward. Joseph seemingly single-handedly saves not only himself, but Pharaoh and the whole of Egypt, and all of his family from starvation through foresight and careful resource management.

When I was asked to do this talk, I was struck by some similarities between this part of Joseph's story and the parable that Jesus told of the rich fool. I like Rembrandt's painting of the rich fool, counting up all his possessions. I was also struck by some archaeological evidence of ancient grain silos, probably like the ones that they used in Egypt to store the grain. At first glance the rich fool's strategy seems to be the same as the one that God suggests to Joseph. Egypt has an abundance of food, and so does the rich fool. Joseph stores the food, and so does the rich fool. But Joseph is vindicated, and the rich fool is condemned for using the same strategy. God sends dire warnings to Egypt, but Jesus tells people not to worry. Why?

## **The Rich Fool**

Let's look at the rich fool first. His land had yielded an abundant crop. Because he was rich, he probably had a lot of land and people to work for him. He would most likely be a millionaire in today's society, and he saw this abundance almost as a problem. He says, "What shall I do?" His solution is to build bigger barns and leave his harvest in it so that he can relax and party. We sense that he is smug and self-important, selfish and greedy. He's thinking to himself "I did it all myself. I get to keep it all myself. I deserve it. I'm worth it. I can now relax." There was no plan for his stored grain. It simply sat there, and when he died it went to waste.

## **Joseph's Story**

So, what about Joseph's story? How is this different? I've looked at four differences between the two stories.

### **1) There are signs to show that Joseph's plan is clearly from God.**

Pharaoh has two strange dreams. Seven fat cows, followed and devoured by seven gaunt ones. Seven healthy heads of grain followed and consumed by seven measly ones. There's a clue here to the reader that the dreams are not just random nightmares. They are actually divinely inspired. There are seven of each organism in both dreams. Seven is the number that represents completeness and perfection, holy. In other words, 'from God.' Pharaoh knows that these are no ordinary dreams but important visions of a meaning. Also note that Joseph says in verse 32 that the dream was given in *two forms*, to show that the matter has been firmly decided by God. In fact, all the dreams in Joseph's story come in pairs - a helpful reminder perhaps that to be certain that a word or picture is from God it will be confirmed by another source.

## **2) The acknowledgement and glory are given to God.**

Pharaoh is disturbed and he wants answers. Not even the wisest amongst his advisors can interpret the dreams but then the cupbearer remembers Joseph who is brought before Pharaoh. Pharaoh says to Joseph, "I've heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." And Joseph's reply is important. He says, "I cannot do it but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires." How easy it would have been for Joseph to take the credit for explaining the dreams. In fact, I wonder what he may have done as a younger man in Canaan.

Instead, he points to God as the interpreter of the dreams. Joseph doesn't seek glory for himself. His experiences since Canaan have humbled him. He doesn't even put himself forward as the person to run the management of the grain storage. It is God who does the steering here. Pharaoh recognises and publicly declares God's wisdom and guiding hand in Joseph, and then appoints him as his right man. Pharaoh says to Joseph, "Since God has made this known to you there's no one as discerning and wise as you."

There's a lesson for us here. Our first duty is to stay true to God, point out his goodness and not push ourselves forward or put our own needs first. And this is really difficult because it's against our nature. It's normal (and some would say, natural) to look after ourselves and those closest to us first. The rich fool did it, and I know that I do it. I think about my over full fridge, and yet again today I have forgotten to bring some food for the Monday food club.

Putting God first may lead to hardship as it did for Joseph when his upright behaviour towards Potiphar and his wife landed him up in prison. We cannot always see why we go through hardships when we put God first but sometimes as in Joseph's case all our previous experiences and encounters can sometimes lead us up to being the right person in the right place at the right time. We have the benefit of looking back in hindsight, and we can see that God's faithfulness throughout Joseph's life. But he had to wait many years to see it fulfilled, and it can be so with us. In fact, we might never know the impact we have for being faithful to God even in the most difficult of circumstances and this is a really tough challenge.

### **3) The plan is to benefit everybody, and not just the rich few.**

The dreams foretell of seven years of bumper harvest, overwhelming plenty, followed by seven years of famine so dreadful that the good years would all be forgotten. Without the foreknowledge that God gives Pharaoh through the dreams it would have been tempting for the Egyptians to squander their bounty in lazy rich living, probably wasting most of the food and then they would have starved in the years that followed. The rich fool was doing it selfishly for himself, he wasn't thinking ahead of other people, he just wanted to party and relax now. Pharaoh on the other hand is told in verse 36 to hold the food in reserve for the whole country so that the country may not be ruined by the famine.

This knowledge is not just for the privileged few, it's a national strategy to sustain the whole population through the famine.

### **4) The plan is not extravagant, but it is enough.**

Joseph's plan is to only store one-fifth of the produce from the bumper years in a national scheme so that there's food enough for the famine. Notice it's only a fifth. It doesn't say why, but maybe it was calculated to be 'just enough.' The rich fool puts all his food into barns for no apparent purpose.

#### *A Summary of the Differences*

- 1) There are signs to show that the plan is clearly from God**
- 2) The acknowledgement and glory are given to God**
- 3) The plan is to benefit everyone not just the rich few**
- 4) The plan is not extravagant, it is just enough**

## **Blessed to be a Blessing**

However, there is more to the story than just a rescue plan for one nation. There were a lot of famines in the Mediterranean cultures during the late Bronze Age. And in fact, archaeologists believe that famine was one of the major causes for the abrupt disappearance of several civilisations, known as *The Bronze Age Collapse*.

So why was Egypt so special at this point in time? The famine didn't just save the people of Egypt, people from other nations got word of the food, and among them was Joseph's own family (as we will see in a later part of the story). Joseph's family was the embryo nation of Israel, God's chosen people to bring his blessing upon the world. Ultimately that blessing was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ who was a direct descendant of Joseph's brother, Judah. So, Christians today can be deeply thankful for those strange dreams of a Pharaoh long ago. God's faithfulness to Joseph was a blessing to him, but through this, Joseph was called to be a blessing to those around him and also to future generations. This is how God works, he's faithful to us so we can be a blessing to others. How wrong the rich fool was. If only he'd shared his bumper harvest with others rather than keeping it to himself and letting it go to waste.

So, what about us today? Maybe it's always been the case, but to me it does feel like we're living in a world that with an increasingly uncertain future. The world political order is changing, and the modern world is likely to increasingly experience food shortages caused by many things: political instability; a rising population; increasingly unpredictable climate; insect population decline and severe topsoil loss. Today's farmers are already struggling to provide our food.

Now you might love him, or you might hate him, but Jeremy Clarkson's TV series *Clarkson's Farm* actually highlights the difficulty that farmers are having with unpredictable weather. Also, I found this statistic from UNESCO pretty shocking: since the mid-1990s, the top 1% richest people took 38% of all the additional wealth accumulated, whereas the bottom half of the world only captured 2% of it. Moreover, we have an epidemic of loneliness in this world.

So how do we, who live in one of the richest nations of the world, blessed with abundance, use our abundance to become a blessing to those around us in other nations and to future generations? And how do we seek God's guidance and leading?

First, we can pray. Then, we can think about what we are blessed with individually and thank God for this. Then we can acknowledge that all good things come from him. And then we can think about how we can use this blessing to bless others.

So, there are obviously many ways that we are blessed differently and there's many ways we can use that blessing.

You might be *financially* blessed. How about investing your money in initiatives such as **Green Pastures** which use money to invest in housing for those who have none.

Perhaps you have *plenty of food* in your cupboards then share some of it with the **Monday Food Club** that distributes it to those that need it.

Maybe you're *rich in time*. Perhaps you could volunteer for something like **Bath City Pastors** or maybe **one of the holiday clubs** that's happening over the summer.

Or perhaps you're *good at befriending people*. Perhaps you can **spend some time with a lonely neighbour** or **take part in one of the initiatives to bring people together in this community**.

Maybe you've *got a garden*. Can you manage it for **the benefit of nature** so that nature can be preserved for future generations?

Perhaps you do all of this and more and I know many of you do. Or perhaps you're not rich in time or money. Perhaps life is just tough and too tough to devote to something new. Maybe think about the things that you do in your daily life, what you spend your money on. Does the food you buy help to heal the soil or harm it? Do the organizations that you purchase things from pay a living wage, or keep people in virtual slavery? What about your leisure activities? Are you aiming to leave this planet in better condition than you found it, or are you damaging it for your own enjoyment?

## **Hold on to Hope**

But perhaps none of this resonates with you because you're just stuck in a really difficult situation, and you actually identify much more with the parts of Joseph's story where he was sold as a slave or in prison. Hold on to hope, that even in this, God is with you and working out his purposes, even though most of the time it doesn't feel like it. So, in everything that you do (and it will be different for each of us) remember these key principles from the stories that we heard today. God calls the person who stores things only for themselves a fool. God's plan involves the flourishing of all humanity, not just a wealthy few. God might have put you in the right place at the right time even though you may be suffering hardship, and God's plans work best when God is leading the way.

## **Final Prayer**

Lord God, we thank you for all the ways that you've blessed us as individuals and a church and a community. We thank you that those blessings come from you. And we ask you now to show us if there are any ways that we can use those blessings to help others around us. Amen.