

## YEARS OF PLENTY, YEARS OF FAMINE

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*“And let them gather all the food of those good years.... Then that food shall be as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine...that the land may not perish during the famine.” (Gen. 41: 35, 36)*

At this season of the year we think of the harvests of the earth. We think of the Lord's goodness and providence.

One of the greatest harvests we read about in the Word took place in Egypt in the days of Joseph. It was not one harvest but seven years of great plenty. We know well that these years were followed by a famine in the land. Joseph had foretold this, and the king of Egypt put him in charge of the task of storing grain during the good years and its allotment in the famine years. Through his foresight and provision, Joseph was able to save not only the Egyptians but his own family in Canaan.

### **The Meaning of the Harvest**

In its inner sense, the account of Joseph's administration in Egypt is about the Lord, whom Joseph represents, and how He takes care of us. The cycle of plenty and famine in Egypt pictures the secret cycle of human spiritual development. The Lord oversees this development in our lives just as Joseph oversaw it in Egypt (*Arcana Coelestia* 5275).

Joseph counseled Pharaoh to collect a fifth of all the harvest in the good years as a reserve supply for the years of famine. Recognizing his insight and wisdom, Pharaoh appointed Joseph himself to carry out this plan, putting him in charge of all the affairs of Egypt. Pharaoh retained only his right as a figurehead; “only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you,” he told Joseph (Genesis 41: 40). The Lord is surely in charge of our lives, yet He leaves the freedom of final decision in our “throne” of free choice.

## **Two Kinds of Food**

The interpretation of Pharaoh's double dream was about food: The interpretation also has an interpretation, for there are two kinds of food. While the body needs food and nourishment, so does the spirit. The Lord said, "Man shall not live by bread alone..." (Matthew 4: 4). We need food for the soul. Therefore He taught, "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life..." (John. 6: 27).

Remarkably, we need spiritual food even while living in the body for "material food does not penetrate to the mind..." (*Arcana Coelestia* 5293).

What is it that feeds the mind or soul? The Lord hinted at the answer when He declared that those are blessed who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5: 6); also, when He said to His disciples, "I have food to eat of which you do not know... My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me..." (John. 4: 32, 34). The Heavenly Doctrine plainly describes spiritual food: "Hunger in the spiritual world or in heaven is not hunger for food, because the angels do not feed upon material food, which is for the body that man carries about in the world; but it is hunger for such food as nourishes their minds. This food, which is called spiritual food, is *to understand truth and be wise in good...*(*Arcana Coelestia* 5576 emphasis added). The Writings go on to show that these same things are what feed a person inwardly "even while he lives in the body" (*Arcana Coelestia* 5293).

## **Our Daily Bread**

The account of Joseph's management of the grain in Egypt during the years of abundance and dearth is interiorly a parable of the Lord's providence in our lives. For each one of us it is the story of how He gives us daily spiritual bread and stores up the food we will need for our spiritual development. The Heavenly Doctrine tells us there is a secret in this that few know at this

day. The secret is that there are times when we learn spiritual truths and goods with innocence and delight. These are the years of “plenty” with us. The Lord stores a portion of the plentiful harvest deep within our spirit.

### **Remains**

The harvests of goods and truths in this storehouse are called “remains,” a term familiar to people of the church but unknown in the world. Remains are “all things of innocence, all things of charity, all things of mercy, and all things of the truth of faith, which from his infancy a person has had from the Lord, and has learned” (*Arcana Coelestia* 661: 2). “Each and all of these things are treasured up;” we are told, “and if a person had them not he would be worse than the savage wild beasts” (*Arcana Coelestia* 661: 2).

Remains contain “the veriest spiritual life of a person...and from [them] that person is spiritually nourished in every case of need and want, that is, in every spiritual famine” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5297e).

In this season of harvest, let us especially be thankful for the spiritual harvest of remains that the Lord has provided. This gift from the Lord is so important! “The remains in a man are for the angels that are with him,” the doctrine explains, “...wherewith they defend the man against the evil spirits who excite the falsities in him, and thus assail him” (*Arcana Coelestia* 737).

The Lord foresees our need for a spiritual storehouse—just as Joseph had foretold the needs of Egypt. Without remains stored up within us we would have no platform or plane of life on which the angels could stand in our defense.

### **The Cultivation of Remains**

Seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. What is our part in them? Can we increase this spiritual harvest even as the prudent farmer increases his crops? Yes, the doctrine teaches that

we can. “From earliest infancy even to the first of childhood, an infant is being introduced by the Lord into heaven... (*Arcana Coelestia* 5243). Wise parents can encourage these “years of plenty” in their children. We can increase them in ourselves.

These are precious times, especially in our infancy and childhood, when the good ground of our mind is open to receive gladly the seeds which the Lord sows. These are times of tender innocence when angels are near, sharing their delight with us in the good things of charity and mutual love. These are times of plenty.

### **Surviving the Famine**

But remember: The spiritual work is not done when the storehouses are full. We must survive the famine. The years of famine signify human states of life not so tender, not so open, not so full of mutual love. These are years of the awakening of our hereditary self-life. When this state comes, the goods of charity and innocence “are withdrawn by the Lord toward the interiors and there stored up...” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5342). They are not destroyed, but stored in reserve.

Survival in the years of famine signifies a stage of spiritual development as important as that signified by the years of plenty. The famine lets us experience our desperate need for the Lord's nourishment. We must go to Him in repentance and with the humility to be fed. This is pictured in the Word by Joseph's brothers coming to buy food. They did not recognize Joseph, yet felt deep remorse for having sinned against him. And they were fed from the reserves in Egypt that Joseph had stored up.

### **The Reunion of the Brothers with Joseph**

The famine brought Joseph and his brothers together again. A spiritual famine can reunite us with the Lord. Only then are we productive. Our thoughts and actions are to be strengthened from spiritual things. Good affections and true thoughts sustain

us in this world and in the life to come. This is the new birth called regeneration, but it takes place only as we set aside what is from ourselves to receive what is from the Lord.

### **The Positive Effect of Despair**

Our change of heart, our regeneration, is made possible through states of despair and desolation that come upon us in the world. Like a famine that causes natural anxiety and distress, these spiritual states of desolation awaken in us a sense of our spiritual inadequacy. The seven years of the famine signify desolation “even to despair.” While no one seeks despair, despair can have a positive effect on us. So we read: “Despair causes those who feel it to acknowledge in an effectual and feeling manner that there is nothing of truth and good from themselves and that salvation flows in by means of truth and good” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6144). This humbling acknowledgement softens a hard heart and opens a closed mind. “Despair also causes people to feel the happiness of life which is from the Lord” we are told; “for when they come out of that state, they are like those who have been condemned to death, and are set free from prison” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6144).

The harvests of the Lord are truly generous. We celebrate the bounty of the earth, but let us not forget the even greater abundance the Lord provides for our spirit throughout all the seasons of our life. “I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me” (Psalms. 13: 6). “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5: 6). *Amen.*

Lessons: Gen. 41: 25-40; Luke 12: 22-31; *Arcana Coelestia* 5576: 2-4