

Genesis 47:13-31 — Prosperity and Scarcity in Egypt

November 27, 2016

I hope everyone had a great turkey day. The only people I know that are anti-Thanksgiving are the turkeys. The rest of us are glad to invite them to dinner and give them a special place at the table to make them feel better.

Thanksgiving is a good time to get together with relatives. How many of you traveled more than 50 miles for Thanksgiving dinner? More than 100? More than 200? I hope the meal was worth the drive.

At CrossWinds, we are marching our way through Genesis on both of our campuses. We are finishing up the life story of Joseph. This morning, as we jump back into Joseph's story, this part of Genesis steps away from the relationship between Joseph and his brothers. The camera zooms out and gives us an overview of what happened for the next 17 years in Egypt and what happened for the next 17 years in Joseph's family. The lessons from these verses will start out very practical and then they get theological at the end.

As we begin our study, these verses give us a window into Joseph's wise management of a nation. We will learn a lot of practical management strategies in these verses.

What does Joseph teach us about wise management?

Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe, so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished by reason of the famine. And Joseph gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, in exchange for the grain that they bought. And Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. Genesis 47:13–14 (ESV)

In earlier parts of Genesis we learned there would be seven years of hard famine. At this point, the famine was not just in Egypt but it was in Canaan.

Everybody was decimated. It looked like the Dust Bowl. There was no water. Things were horrible. What was Joseph's answer?

1. Free government programs were not the answer.

I want you to notice that Joseph continued selling grain to the people. He sold it to them until they had no more money. I want to be careful how I present this because I don't want to offend anyone. Notice that during a time of crisis there were no free government handouts. People still bought food. The government didn't give everyone free food.

Why didn't Joseph just give people free food?

A free food program would have destroyed people's dignity and self-respect. If Joseph gave people grain for free, it would have destroyed their self respect. They wouldn't have been contributing to their success or demise. They wouldn't have been giving or receiving value. If food was free, it would have destroyed their sense of self-worth. It would have crippled them mentally.

A free food program would have fostered dependency rather than initiative. When people purchased grain, they knew they had value and gave value. Grain was worth something, and their money was worth something. It doesn't say Joseph inflated the prices to gouge people. It simply says Joseph charged for food. From the flow of the rest of this chapter I am confident he charged a fair price, not an exorbitant price. Since food was worth something, people took initiative to serve their fellow countrymen and women and earn money to buy food. If you just give people food, they will have no initiative to make themselves better or to serve others.

A free food program would have encouraged waste.

Charging for food discouraged waste of food. When food comes free, it has no value so you waste it. You see this sometimes in government-run school lunch programs where inner city poor children are given generous healthy meals of beans and carrots and meatloaf and potatoes with gravy. They sit down for lunch, eat a little then dump the rest in the trash can. Then they leave the cafeteria and head for the vending machines to buy Snickers bars. Why do they throw their good food away? They didn't pay for it so it has no value to them. Many of us know that government programs are legendary for waste especially when they make things free. Free things erode the value of what is given away.

We see this in our homes. How long do teenagers take showers? They usually shower until the hot water tank is empty. Mom and Dad are yelling in the bathroom, "You are wasting water!" Why do we care about hot water? We are paying for it. Why don't they care for it? They are not paying for it so it encourages waste.

I am not discouraging benevolent gifts. That is different. That is generosity to help individual people in a personal crisis. It can be different when it comes to free government programs or free handout programs. When everybody gets stuff for free, it discourages self-respect. It kills self-esteem and it destroys a good work ethic. Joseph charged fairly for food but even in a famine people had to pay for things. That is simply people management.

I think there is some wisdom in this if you are managing people. People gain self-respect and personal value when they have to pay for things. Don't just give things to them.

And when the money was all spent in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us food. Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone." And Joseph answered, "Give your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone." So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys. He supplied them with food in exchange for all their livestock that year. Genesis 47:15–17 (ESV)

Now we get to the point that everyone's money is used up. All their savings are depleted. It seem like this would have been a good time to start a free government handout program. Joseph didn't go there.

When people can't pay, it is often better to barter than to gift.

Since they didn't have money, he moved to bartering. "You give me your animals and I will give you food for the year."

Incidentally, some people see this as a harsh attempt to move the people of the land into permanent poverty. As I look at the text, I see it differently. Animals help you work the field but they are not like a John Deere tractor. You can't leave them in the barn for a year until you need them. You have to feed animals every day. During a famine, when there is a shortage of grain, what is one of the greatest drains on your resources? It is feeding the animals you can not use because you are in a drought. When Joseph offered to buy the animals from the people, he was offering to take care of them and feed them so the people didn't have to. He was offering to take a huge burden off their shoulders in this crisis.

While it doesn't say this in the text, I think it implies it later in the text that when the people go back to farming, they get use of their animals again. If they didn't have use of their animals, they couldn't return to farming.

The key thing to observe is there are still no free handouts. When money was gone, Joseph moved to bartering so people would still be giving and receiving something of value so their self-respect and dignity was maintained.

How would we apply this in our world? This would be the single woman whose minivan won't start. The mechanic tells her she needs a new starter but she doesn't have the money. The mechanic needs cookies for his company Christmas party. She offers to bake all the cookies for him and he will put a new starter in her car. That way there was an exchange of value. The single mother kept her self-esteem. She could give value to others with her life. Her self of dignity, importance, value and worth was maintained because she met the mechanic's need and he met her need.

There is a popular book titled, When Helping Hurts. I haven't read it but I suspect it follows this same line of thinking. Simply throwing money at the poor can be the absolute worst thing for those in need. It can ruin the self-respect of the poor and discourage their sense of value. It is much better to give those in hard financial times a job and not just money.

The first secret of good management is don't give things away for free. People need to pay for things. A fair price, not an exorbitant price. The second secret of good management is if people can't pay for things, barter with them so they can still give and receive value.

And when that year was ended, they came to him the following year and said to him, "We will not hide from my lord that our money is all spent. The herds of livestock are my lord's. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our land. Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we with our land will be servants to Pharaoh. And give us seed that we may live and not die, and that the land may not be desolate." So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for all the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe on them. The land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made servants of them from one end of Egypt to the other. Only the land of the priests he did not buy, for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them; therefore they did not sell their land. Genesis 47:18–22 (ESV)

Notice that after their money was gone and their livestock was gone, Joseph still didn't give people free handouts. He didn't come to them with the solution, he allowed them to propose a solution. This is very important. If Joseph proposed the idea of them selling themselves and their land to the state, do you think there would have been rebellion? Yes. He let the people assess their situation and come up with a solution. Since the people created the solution, the people were willing to live with the solution, especially when it was difficult. It involved them giving up their freedom to give themselves and their land to work for the government. In exchange, the government gave them food and seed.

When people are at the end of their resources, it is often better for them to voluntarily give themselves into full-time government or private service than to simply become a government dependent.

The people willingly gave themselves to full-time government service when they hit the end of all resources. Was their dignity maintained? Was their self-respect and self-worth maintained by no free government handouts? Yes.

Today, this is the rough equivalent of somebody losing his money, his job and his car. Rather than sitting at home watching cable and expecting the government to pay their bills, he determines to still give value to society by

signing up to serve in the Army or National Guard. He gives away his rights to freedom to serve the government because he cannot make it on his own. In exchange, the government takes care of his food, his housing, his clothing and gives him a salary. He maintains his self-respect and dignity.

Another variety of this could be signing up to work at a private camp where the camp can't provide you a large salary but they will give you free housing and free food in exchange for you living there and giving up some of your freedoms.

Our country doesn't run this way and many people in our country don't think this way. We live in an entitlement society. We live in a time where some people find it is more lucrative to stay at home and live on government assistance than to work a job. That is not healthy. That is not good. It is unwise management to pay people to do nothing. It is especially unwise management when people are paid more money to do nothing than to do something.

I am not saying this because I am anti-poor or not compassionate toward people in tough economic situations. Government programs have their place. They do many good things. I am simply saying it is devastating to take away a person's dignity by giving her everything instead of allowing her to add value and earn things.

Let me review. First, there were no hand-outs under Joseph not because of a lack of compassion but so people maintained their dignity and worth. Second, when money wasn't available, Joseph moved to bartering so everyone realized they had something of value to give. Third, when people had nothing left

but their freedom, it was appropriate for them to sell their freedom to serve the government if they were going to be maintained by their government. They kept their dignity.

Then Joseph said to the people, “Behold, I have this day bought you and your land for Pharaoh. Now here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. And at the harvests you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones.” And they said, “You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh.” So Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt, and it stands to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth; the land of the priests alone did not become Pharaoh’s. Genesis 47:23–26 (ESV)

Joseph instituted a 20 percent flat tax on everybody that worked for the government. When I first read this, I didn’t know what to think. It sounds like Joseph enslaved all the people to work for Pharaoh. As I thought about this and did some research, I changed my mind. Joseph was very kind toward the people at the end of their resources that worked for the government. The typical tax on grain at this time ranged between 40 to 60 percent. Joseph only charged a flat tax of 20 percent. There were no additional property taxes to pay. There were no land rental costs. It was simple. “You get to keep 80 percent of what you make. I get 20 percent.” Think of the genius behind this. It incentivized work.

Joseph didn’t penalize success.

In our country, the more money we make, the more taxes we pay. That de-incentivizes work. I have counseled people over the years who intentionally work less hours or do less business because if they make too much money or serve too many people, they pay more taxes and lose it all.

Wise management wouldn’t penalize those who are successful. Wise management encourages productivity, not discourages it. Joseph’s strategy was

the more money you make, the more money you get to keep. Of course, the more money made, the more money paid to the government.

In addition, notice the low tax structure Joseph set up to incentivize productivity. I am not an economics major so I say this carefully. I realize I am out of my league on this but it appears Joseph's strategy for raising taxes was incentivizing more productivity without penalty, not by raising the tax rate for everyone or for those more successful than most.

In addition, I simply want us to notice how the people felt about Joseph's leadership.

Joseph was committed to serving the people, not the people serving Joseph.

The government helped the people. It didn't oppress the people. You wonder why I say this. Look at the reaction to the people on how Joseph handled things. They were not in the streets protesting with the words, "No taxation without representation." They were not angry at Joseph. They called him their hero. They put his face on their dollar bill. He had his own Egyptian version of the Lincoln Memorial in Egypt because he was a hero of the country. When people look back and say Joseph was their hero, you know government ran well. It was there to serve the people, not use the people.

Joseph's management policies worked so well they still existed in the days of Moses, 400 years after he instituted them. I know this isn't theological but it is wise for us to take a page from Joseph's management playbook and use some of these people management principles for ourselves.

Now the camera switches. While the land of Egypt was falling apart and Joseph wisely handled the crisis, now the camera pans back to the land of Goshen. How were things going for the sons of Jacob in the land?

Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly. And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years. So the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were 147 years. Genesis 47:27–28 (ESV)

The first thing we see is they gained possessions. While everybody else was selling their land, the sons of Jacob were doing so well they were buying land. They were not just buying land but they were buying new cars, new homes, a boat with a wakeboard rack for the Nile River and jet skis for the family. Things were going very well. They had it all.

In addition, they were having kids like rabbits. People were claiming it must be in the water of Goshen. Everybody was having kids. Their church had one service but the nursery had two because it was packed out. Their Wednesday night AWANA program looked like an army of little people. Every family drove a 15-passenger van or school bus.

Grandpa Jacob, who kept talking about dying, ended up living another 17 years. I think this is interesting. Joseph had 17 years with Jacob at the beginning of his life where his father cared for him. Now Joseph gets an additional 17 years with his father at the end of Jacob's life but the roles were reversed. He now cared for his father, which is biblical.

Just as a little aside, it is biblical for Christians to take care of their elderly parents.

But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. 1 Timothy 5:8 (ESV)

Paul was very strong on this. Christians must take care of their elderly relatives. There is also a special word in here to women who care for elderly relatives.

If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows. 1 Timothy 5:16 (ESV)

In our Bible, it only uses the term widow (female). In classical Greek the Greek word used here also covers widowers (male). One of a Christian woman's jobs is to care for her aging relatives that are left alone. Here we see Joseph caring for his aging father.

Now things get exciting.

And when the time drew near that Israel must die, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "If now I have found favor in your sight, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal kindly and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt, but let me lie with my fathers. Carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burying place." He answered, "I will do as you have said." And he said, "Swear to me"; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed. Genesis 47:29–31 (ESV)

Jacob was close to death. He called Joseph to him and he made Joseph give him a solemn promise. He asked Joseph to put his hand under Jacob's thigh. To me that sounds a little too close. I prefer shaking hands. I think that is a better idea. In that day it was the hand under the thigh to make a promise so that is what they went with. You put your hand where there wasn't a tan line. Jacob said, "I know things are going extremely well. I know you are a great leader. The people of Egypt love you. Your brothers and their families think coming to Egypt was the best thing since sliced bread. We are filthy rich and successful while

everyone else is struggling. What you need to remember is this is not your home. This is not my home. As my lasting legacy, bury me in the land of Canaan. Bury me with Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah in the Promised Land because some day you and the rest of the family will be there. That is your true home.”

Then it struck me what an appropriate challenge this is for each of us. Many of us are enjoying success in this life. Our families are flourishing. We are doing better than most. We bought land and settle down roots here in Iowa. If you know Christ, this world is not your home. It is so easy to get distracted think this world is where we belong, but it isn't.

Look what the Bible says.

But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. 2 Peter 3:13 (NIV)

Things may go well for us in this life, but we will not be here forever. For others of us, this life is a struggle. Either way, we need to remember this life is not all there is to life. There is a new heavens and earth that await us.

The Bible talks about his future day many times in the old and new testaments. When will this new earth come?

1. Christ hasn't returned because he is giving people more time to repent.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 2 Peter 3:9 (ESV)

Christ hasn't returned to set up the new heavens and the earth, because he is patient and giving people more time to repent. Rest assured, this world will not go on forever. It is not our final home.

2. When Christ returns, it will either be a day of judgment or of joy.

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. Malachi 4:1–2 (ESV)

Christ's return will be a day of joy for us but it will be a day of fearful judgment for those apart from Christ. This is all the more reason for us to not be afraid of sharing the good news of Jesus with others. Responding to Christ is the only thing that matters when Jesus returns.

3. When Christ returns, it will be the day of our reward.

“Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. Revelation 22:12 (NIV)

When Christ returns, he is eager to reward us for how we lived in this life. Every time we turn away from the pleasures of sin in this life, we know we will be rewarded with an even greater pleasure in its place in the next life. Every time we give of our resources for the glory of Christ and his kingdom now, we know that is an investment we lay up in heaven.

4. What matters in the future is not the things we had but the life we lived.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 2 Peter 3:11 (ESV)

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. Colossians 3:1–2 (ESV)

I love the way Peter reminds us that since everything in this world is passing away, what matters is not what we have in life but how we live our lives.

What matters in eternity is the holiness and godliness with which we lived our

lives today. Therefore, as it says in Colossians, we set our minds on living for our future home, not just the prosperity in our current home.

Conclusion

Father, thank you this world is not the end. While there are many good things in this life, there are also many hard things in this life. Jesus, thank you for saving us and promising to return for us. Thank you that when you return for your children, it will be a day of joy, not of terror. It is a day of rewards, not of fear. Help us to live in this life remembering this world isn't our final resting place, just like Egypt wasn't Jacob's final resting place. While we have many things to be thankful for on this week of thanksgiving, we are most thankful for Jesus and the promise we have through him that we look forward to a new heavens and earth that is better than anything this life can offer.



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