

State Of The Famine

Genesis 47:13-27 February 15, 2023

In 1790, George Washington gave the first State of the Union address. In it, he explained some of the challenges facing the fledgling nation and spoke of how Americans would have to cooperate together to secure their future.¹ His closing paragraph began, "*The welfare of our country is the great object to which our cares and efforts ought to be directed.*"²

In our text tonight we find the State of the Famine. Egypt was facing a life-and-death crisis. Joseph was a man with a plan. But reading it makes us scratch our heads. Of all the things Genesis records for us, why devote space to the economic and agrarian reforms made in an ancient kingdom that no longer exists? On top of that, Joseph's actions come off as harsh, even heartless, toward a nation of starving people. Then, as we consider the longer-term ramifications of the system he established, we realize that this consolidation of power eventually led to the enslavement of God's people for four hundred years.

So, what's going on here? We know Joseph was administratively brilliant. We know he was anointed by God. But his plan doesn't sit very well with us from most of the angles we approach it. Was he wrong to solve the problem of famine in this way? Was it simply a mistake of judgment? Should he have been more charitable? And what benefit is this record for us since we're concerned with *Israeli, redemption* history, not Egyptian economic history?

Joseph's plan speaks to us three ways: First, it serves as a cautionary tale of how human systems degenerate. Even those that start off well will, in the end, be corrupted because *people* are corrupt and therefore every human system can only have a limited benefit to a limited group.

Second, the sad state of Egypt here at the end of Genesis is presented in stark contrast to what God designed at the *beginning* of the Book. In Eden, everywhere you look there is life and growth and peace and limitless potential for a glorious future. In Egypt, we see waste, starvation, near societal collapse. And Egypt was the greatest kingdom on earth at the time. The contrast between what God offered and what mankind ultimately settled for is shocking.

Third, our text closes with a direct comparison between the lost unbelievers of Egypt and God's family of faith. One is trying to dodge death, the other is thriving *in spite of* the ravages of sin.

Genesis 47:13 - ¹³But there was no food in the entire region, for the famine was very severe. The land of Egypt and the land of Canaan were exhausted by the famine.

The word for "exhausted" can mean "wasting away."³ This was a catastrophic emergency.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1790_State_of_the_Union_Address

² <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/first-annual-address-congress-0>

³ *Dictionary Of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*

We sometimes refer to things like famines or earthquakes as “acts of God.” In reality, they are acts of *sin*. We’re in the back of Genesis. Turn to the front and you’ll see what God designed, what God wanted for humanity. When Adam and Eve picked the fruit, famines came off the branch with it. Genesis 47 is what happens when people choose sin.

In grace, God provided Joseph and *through* him a way for people to be saved. Not *just* the chosen family, but *anyone* could go to Egypt and be saved from starvation, thanks to God’s generosity.

Genesis 47:14 - ¹⁴Joseph collected all the silver to be found in the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan in exchange for the grain they were purchasing, and he brought the silver to Pharaoh’s palace.

Joseph exerts enormous control over the economy and governmental policy of Egypt in this text, but we see he does not do so to enrich *himself*.⁴ He’s careful to deposit all the silver (and everything else) into Pharaoh’s accounts. No insider deals for himself.

Modern readers might tend to think, “He should’ve just *given* the grain away for free.” That’s what we expect from our governments, right? When a disaster happens, the government shows up and says, “We’re gonna spend \$10 billion to alleviate the damage done by this hurricane or this fire or this tornado.” Of course, regular people never seem to actually see any of that money, do they?

In July of 2022 *Bloomberg* published an article titled, “*How Much Covid Relief Was Stolen? No One Really Knows.*”⁵ In it they write, “Hundreds of billions of dollars were likely siphoned off of aid programs,” and called it, “Wasted money on a historic scale.”

This wasn’t happening under Joseph’s watch, because Joseph was a man with Godly integrity. But, why *not* give it away? Well, there are a few reasons. First, that’s simply not how things were done at that time. Derek Kidner writes, “*It was [unquestionable]⁶ in the ancient world that one paid one’s way so long as one had anything to part with - including, in the last resort, one’s liberty.*”⁷

Another reason why it would’ve been unwise to simply *give* away all the grain is that a black market would’ve likely sprung up - where profiteers would overcharge other refugees.⁸

Joseph also had to plan *past* the famine. Egypt would need to survive *longer* than the 7 years of lack. Kenneth Mathews writes, “*What Joseph established not only saved the people from starvation but also provided a system whereby they could live securely once the famine abated.*”⁹

⁴ Andrew Steinmann *Genesis: An Introduction & Commentary*

⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-07-12/how-much-covid-aid-was-stolen-no-one-really-knows>

⁶ “Axiomatic” in original

⁷ Derek Kidner *Genesis*

⁸ Steinmann

⁹ Kenneth A Mathews *Genesis 11:27-50:26*

Genesis 47:15 - ¹⁵When the silver from the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan was gone, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us food. Why should we die here in front of you? The silver is gone!"

Silver, so valuable in one moment, can be worthless the next. You can't eat it. You can't plant it. Like our own society, Egypt was probably full of people who dedicated their lives to piling up wealth for themselves. Silver they worked so many years for was gone. It's a good reminder for us not to put our trust in silver or gold or what some sacrilegiously call "The Almighty Dollar."

"Why should we die here in front of you?" *They shouldn't!* God didn't want them to die, He wanted them to live. He wants *you* to live, too. There's no need for anyone to die eternally when He has thrown open the gates to His throne and beckoned all to come and receive from His storehouse.

In their hour of need, there was only *one* place they could go: To the person God had provided. Whether you were an Egyptian, a Canaanite, a Hebrew, just *one man* could save you. And he was *ready* to save anyone who sought salvation. The parallels to Christ Jesus are beautiful.

Genesis 47:16 - ¹⁶But Joseph said, "Give me your livestock. Since the silver is gone, I will give you food in exchange for your livestock."

It's hard to say whether the people actually brought their animals and dropped them off at Pharaoh's palace - that seems pretty impractical.¹⁰ On the other hand, they had no food to feed their livestock. So, whether they were actually giving the animals away or simply mortgaging them to the crown, that means that Pharaoh would be responsible to feed them and maintain them. Joseph is not just *taking* these animals, he's relieving the penniless Egyptians from the responsibility of caring for livestock that was essential for the nation *and international* economy.

Genesis 47:17 - ¹⁷So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and he gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks of sheep, the herds of cattle, and the donkeys. That year he provided them with food in exchange for all their livestock.

Scholars tell us that where it says "he provided them with food" can be understood as, "He escorted them through distress to safety."¹¹ Joseph used his power not to oppress but to assist and guide. He walked with these needy people through the valley of the shadow of death. But it was a long walk - year after year, the famine dragged on and Joseph had to shoulder more and more.

Genesis 47:18-19 - ¹⁸When that year was over, they came the next year and said to him, "We cannot hide from our lord that the silver is gone and that all our livestock belongs to our lord. There is nothing left for our lord except our bodies and our land. ¹⁹Why should we die here in front of you—both us and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. Then we with

¹⁰ Gordon Wenham *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 2: Genesis 16-50*

¹¹ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

our land will become Pharaoh's slaves. Give us seed so that we can live and not die, and so that the land won't become desolate."

Cynics will sometimes say the Old Testament is pro-slavery. We read this or sections in the Law of Moses that talk about owning or becoming slaves and it feels a little sketchy. The reality is the "slavery" being discussed here is *not* what we think of when we think about slavery in America. That was known as chattel slavery, where a person is treated as property and they have zero freedom.

This is referring to indentured servitude. When a person had a debt but no money to pay, they could freely choose to become a servant to their creditor until the debt was settled. We see this depicted in old sitcoms where the person eats at the restaurant but has no money to pay, so they have to wash dishes all night to settle the bill.

The Egyptians were not becoming chattel slaves. They would still retain their personal freedom. But now they would become employees of the Pharaoh, with the legal requirements that come along with that. And we notice that it was *their* idea, not Joseph's.

This was a widespread practice throughout Mesopotamia, especially during famines.¹² As Henry Morris points out, the alternative was death or social anarchy.¹³ So we see the word "slaves" and it bothers us, but we need to understand, first, that this is not American slavery. And second, this plan would *cost* Pharaoh quite a bit. Because now the crown is responsible to not only protect the kingdom, but also to feed and clothe and support all the people *and* their animals, not just for a couple of years, but continually.

If Joseph rejected their proposal, the result would've been that the people would die and the land would revert to desert.¹⁴ So, again we have this contrast between God's Eden and man's Egypt. Egypt is the *best*, the *strongest*, the place to be. And it was just a year or two from being swallowed up by the desert. Meanwhile, God wanted Eden for us, but we failed. Remember, in Genesis 2, the Lord had asked Adam to work in the Garden and watch over it. We get to the back of the Book and what has man accomplished? We can barely keep the world from being completely ruined.

Notice, they not only ask for food, but they also ask for *seed*. They *believe* Joseph was right that the famine would end. They only had that hope because of God's revelation. But they *did* believe, so they hung the weight of their lives on Joseph and, by extension, God's grace.

Genesis 47:20-21 - ²⁰In this way, Joseph acquired all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh, because every Egyptian sold his field since the famine was so severe for them. The land became Pharaoh's, ²¹and Joseph made the people servants from one end of Egypt to the other.

¹² Victor Avigdor Hurowitz *Joseph's Enslavement Of The Egyptians In Light Of Famine Texts From Mesopotamia*

¹³ Henry Morris *The Genesis Record*

¹⁴ Wenham

Your version may say that Joseph “moved [the people all] into cities from one end of Egypt to another.” The Hebrew words are very similar. Linguists show that the differences between those two phrases are only different by a couple small characters. It’s possible that Joseph brought them temporarily into distribution centers, or it’s possible that he removed people from their hereditary land and relocated them so as to ease the transition of ownership to Pharaoh.¹⁵ Some think that he moved workers into cities and they *commuted* to the farms.¹⁶ What’s clear is that farming was still happening, but now it was a tenet-farming arrangement.

Genesis 47:22 - 22 Only the land of the priests he did not buy; for the priests had rations allotted to them by Pharaoh, and they ate their rations which Pharaoh gave them; therefore they did not sell their lands.

It seems that Pharaoh stepped in to exempt the priestly class. When verse 17 listed horses being exchanged, it indicates that Joseph treated rich and poor alike - no carve outs for billionaires.

So Pharaoh says, “The priests are exempt. They get free food and they get to keep their land.” This is attested widely in historical discoveries.¹⁷ But again, this is a cautionary tale. You see, the priests of Egypt became richer and stronger. Over time, tension would build between the Pharaohs and the priests because, ultimately, the priests had *more* power and wealth than the king did. One source writes, “*In time the priests began to serve themselves more than [the people or even the gods]. One of the contributing factors to the collapse of the central government at the end of the Old Kingdom was that the king had exempted the priesthood from paying taxes.*”¹⁸

This human system - well-meaning and generous at first - became corrupted by corrupt men, and inevitably brought destruction instead of construction.

Meanwhile, these priests, who Pharaoh insulated from the pain of the famine, should’ve had to answer to the people. Where was Neper, the god of grain? Where was Osiris, the god of agriculture and vegetation? Where was Min or Renenutet or Dedun? All gods of wealth or prosperity or harvest? *All* were silent because all were nonexistent. The priests were their supposed representatives. But they did nothing to help, nothing to save, in fact they were a liability.

Meanwhile, the God of Abraham made it *His* business to help and to save and to provide and to reveal and to put His people into position so that pagan unbelievers could hear the truth and be saved. Oh, what God has done to pour out grace on an unbelieving and undeserving world!

Genesis 47:23-24 - 23 Then Joseph said to the people, “Indeed I have bought you and your land this day for Pharaoh. Look, here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. 24 And it shall come to pass in the harvest that you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh. Four-fifths shall be

¹⁵ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

¹⁶ Goldingay

¹⁷ Eugene Roop *Genesis: Believers Church Bible Commentary*

¹⁸ <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1026/clergy-priests--priestesses-in-ancient-egypt/>

your own, as seed for the field and for your food, for those of your households and as food for your little ones."

This 20% flat tax in Egypt was much less than the norm at the time. At other points in Egyptian history, the tax was more like 33% or even 40%.¹⁹ Under Hammurabi in Babylon, tax on produce was as high as 66%.²⁰ It was 50% in Sparta, 75% in ancient Iran.²¹

The truth is, now that sin dominated creation, governments were needed to control human behavior. Some central planning was necessary because more famines would come. Hostile armies would invade. Floods would decimate crops. Taxes, like famines, are a result of sin.

Genesis 47:25-26 - ²⁵ So they said, "You have saved our lives; let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's servants." ²⁶ And Joseph made it a law over the land of Egypt to this day, that Pharaoh should have one-fifth, except for the land of the priests only, which did not become Pharaoh's.

There's research that shows their words were more than grateful sentiment, they were also a legally binding agreement.²² At the same time, Joseph was a national hero.²³ They saw his actions as full of grace. Their response to his grace was a desire to serve and to remain under the protection of the king. Still, this is a far cry from what God established in the Garden. And what was a welcome relief at the time became an oppressive regime later. That's what sin does.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch:

Genesis 47:27 - ²⁷ So Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the country of Goshen; and they had possessions there and grew and multiplied exceedingly.

What a dramatic statement after the verses we just read! Egypt is dying, people are starving, their only option is indentured servitude. Then you pan over to God's people and it's totally different. They have all they need. They have food. They have their animals. They have their own land. They have a future not guaranteed by a corruptible government, but guaranteed by an incorruptible God. God wanted Adam and Eve and Noah and Ishmael and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob all to be fruitful and to multiply - He said it many times, and here it is happening! Because fruitfulness isn't connected to whether the winds blow or the rains fall or the crops come in. Fruitfulness comes from God. He can bring manna to any wilderness. That's what He delights to do.

At the same time, as Eugene Roop points out, when we compare Israel to Egypt in this scene, God's people just don't quite fit in, do they? Abraham didn't quite fit in in Canaan. Noah didn't quite fit in in Mesopotamia. The Christians didn't quite fit in in Rome. We *can't* quite fit in because

¹⁹ Donald Redford *A Study Of The Biblical Story Of Joseph*

²⁰ Steinmann

²¹ August Dillmann *Genesis Critically And Exegetically Expounded Volume 2*

²² Hurowitz

²³ R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning And Blessing*

the Christian life is a completely different world than the Egypt everyone else lives in. We need to understand the differences and conduct ourselves accordingly. We don't *want* to fit in with the famine. We want to enjoy the fullness of God by being in the place He's placed us, following *His* leading, abiding by *His* boundaries, trusting in *His* provision day-by-day.