

KINGDOM ECONOMY

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 47:1-31
13th Message
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Genesis 47:1-31

Fifth grade was a great year. I loved elementary school. I was the class President. I had great friends. We played four-square at recess, and everyone just seemed to get along. Things seemed simple. Life was good.

Then I moved into sixth grade. I moved up to the middle school, which combined students from several elementary schools. Instead of being the oldest in the school, I was the youngest. The rules were different. The social groups were more complicated, and I didn't know where I fit. If the fifth grade was a mountaintop, sixth grade was a valley. In fifth grade, everything was great. Sixth grade was probably the hardest year of my school life.

What made one year so different from the next? A different place. A different group of people. Different expectations. Different status.

Many of us have gone through changes like this. One moment things are great, and then a bunch of stuff changes and nothing is the same anymore. How do we navigate those changes? And what is God doing during those times?

This morning we're going to see how the circumstances of God's people change dramatically. They go from starving in Canaan to living off the fat of the land in Egypt. Their economic status changes dramatically. And as most politicians say, what everyone cares most about is the economy.

In our passage today, we're going to see Joseph making some interesting decisions that will completely transform the Egyptian economy. He creates a clear set of winners and losers. But what we want to notice as we read this story is what God is doing behind the scenes. Instead of keeping all of our focus on the Egyptian economy, we want to pay attention to God's kingdom economy.

We live in an earthly economy. We can't escape it. We have to pay for food. We have to have money to live

somewhere. You need a job to make money. Even if we have a perfectly healthy attitude toward money, it plays a huge role in our lives.

In the Old Testament, the economy was mainly based around the land. That's why one of the most significant themes of the Old Testament is the land. It shows up on the first page when God creates a land and gives it to his creation to manage. Not too much later in Genesis, God promises Abraham that he will give his descendants a land of their own.

And even now, land is incredibly important. Consider what financial guru Suze Orman has said: "Owning a home is a keystone of wealth... both financial affluence and emotional security".¹

Of course, this is what makes living in the Bay Area so difficult. Owning land is incredibly expensive. That's why there is always the temptation to move away. It's the American dream to own your property. Until you own property, you don't have that sense of financial affluence and emotional security.

It turns out owning property was also the Israelite dream. And the Egyptian dream. And the Assyrian dream. And the dream of most people in most cultures. If you owned land, your life was better.

We're going to look at this story in three parts. First, we'll look at the economic decisions Joseph made. In that section, we'll have a lot of questions without a lot of answers. Then we'll look at our situation. What is life like here? What do we have in common with the people in our story? Finally, we look at what Jesus has to say. He's going to help us connect the dots and figure out what it means to follow him here in Silicon Valley.

Joseph's economic policy

You may not have woken up this morning and thought, "I'd really like to understand how land ownership policies transformed the Egyptian economy in the second millennium BC." But if you did, we're in luck, because that is exactly what our text is about.

The main point is not the specifics of the Egyptian economy. It's the stark contrast between how that economy treated the Hebrews and the Egyptians. Let's back up one verse to the verse that we concluded with last week and read Genesis 47:12 and 27 together.

Genesis 47:12:

And Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and all his father's household with food, according to the number of their dependents.

Then, there's a section of verses describing how Joseph interacted with the Egyptians. And it concludes with a bookend summary of his family.

Genesis 47:27:

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.

This is a miracle story. God came through for the family of Jacob with nothing short of a miracle. Think of all the pain this family has gone through: losing Joseph, facing a famine, confusing tests from a strange Egyptian ruler. But in a moment, all of that has been transformed. They literally went from feast to famine.

But the middle part of our passage tells a different story. Listen to how life for the Egyptians changed.

Genesis 47:13-14:

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. 14 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.

Joseph begins by collecting all the money. When he's done, Pharaoh owns all the money in Egypt. It continues in verse 17.

Genesis 47:17:

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.

The Egyptians eventually ran out of money, so they bought food with livestock. When Joseph is done, Pharaoh owns all the livestock in the region.

Genesis 47:20-21:

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. 21 As for the people, he made servants of them from one end of Egypt to the other.

The Egyptians ran out of livestock, so they traded their land and themselves. When Joseph is done, Pharaoh owns all the land, and all the people have sold themselves into slavery. In terms of an economic policy, Joseph has transformed Egypt from a place where individuals had wealth and property and freedom. Now the central government owns everything, and all the people are essentially sharecroppers on national land.

As we were planning out the Joseph series, I wanted to preach this passage so that I could do some study to better understand Joseph's actions here. What are we to make of these decisions? Were they good ones? Was it fair?

It's tricky to look back four thousand years and pick apart Joseph's economic decisions in a very different culture. But here are a few observations.

The Egyptians don't seem to mind how their circumstance changed. In fact, they are portrayed as being grateful.

Genesis 47:25:

And they said, "You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh."

I talked about this passage with a friend who is a PhD candidate in economics at Stanford. He pointed out that governments typically do not have a great record of responding to a climate crisis. I think that's probably true of any kind of crisis. The fact that the Egyptians came out of this and that they were happy with their government says a lot.

But maybe they weren't happy with the fact that Israel was gaining property while they were losing theirs. There seems to be some link between the prosperity of the Hebrews in this season and the oppression that happens soon afterwards.

In this section, we are told that the Hebrews "were fruitful and multiplied greatly." The next part of the story opens with an explanation of the oppression and slavery of the Hebrews in Egypt. We see the same phrase in Exodus 1:7, "the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly". This is the reason given for why they became oppressed. There were simply too many of them to handle.

Joseph's economy created a disparity in that the Egyptians lost their land, and the Hebrews gained land. The Egyptians lost and the Hebrews won. But maybe as soon as a generation later, everything was flipped. Soon, the Egyptians were in charge and the Israelites were slaves.

At first, the system worked for God's people. Then it didn't. It seems like Joseph's favoring of the Israelites at least contributed to their oppression later. So what do we conclude?

Did Joseph make a mistake? Should he have gone lighter on the Egyptians? Did he cause the oppression? Or was this God's will all along? Was he a hero and did better than anyone else would have? Was this the best economic option possible, and only Joseph could see it?

By the way, it's okay to ask questions of the Bible for which you don't have answers. I don't have answers to all of those questions. I think the narrator wants us to ask those questions even though he doesn't answer them. We are drawn into the story, and we want to know more.

Earthly power is perishable

We don't get all the answers we want. The only thing we know for certain is that God's plan was carried out. God predicted this. He knew about the famine. He knew Joseph would save the lives of the Egyptians. He also knew that it would lead to 400 years of oppression. And he knew that after the oppression, Joseph would lead the Hebrews out of Egypt and eventually to the land he promised them.

As the story unfolds on the pages of the Old Testament, one thing is clear: This is God's story for his glory.

Joseph is sold into slavery, elevated to Potiphar's chief of staff, thrown into prison, then becomes second in charge over Egypt. Jacob's family suffers a famine, makes it big in Egypt, then gets oppressed for four hundred years. The Egyptians are saved by an Israelite, end up being owned by the Pharaoh, and years later decide to enslave the Hebrews.

Everyone has their path, but ultimately, God is good. His goal is to bless his creation. All of this is his story for his glory.

Here's how the author of Ecclesiastes puts it:

Ecclesiastes 5:15:

As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. Posture toward death.

Did you know that the Queen of England owns approximately 1/6th of the earth's land surface?² Technically, as a feudal landowner, she holds title to all British Commonwealth areas, including Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

But what does that really mean? Just like everyone else, even the Queen of England "shall take nothing for her toil that she may carry away in her hand."

My children are primarily in high school now, and one has gone off to college. They're starting to think about leaving the nest. A few months ago, one of them asked us, "Dad, will we still have our rooms when we go off to college." That turned into a teachable moment. I helped clear up any real estate misconception they had.

I asked them what they meant by "their room". It seemed like they were confused. I explained to them that they don't have a room. In reality, their mother and I have many rooms. Out of the goodness of our hearts, we let them live in those rooms rent-free.

We live within a certain kind of economic system. It's very different from the system that Joseph put in place in Egypt. But it controls so many aspects of our lives. I had a conversation this week with a friend who had his identity stolen—bank accounts, credit cards, loans, investments. Every day there's a new fraud to deal with.

Last week I had a fascinating conversation with someone new to PBC about cryptocurrency. We are

in the middle of what might be another economic transformation in our world. Maybe cryptocurrency will help even things out? Maybe it won't? But the world is constantly changing.

Some of you are doing really well in the system of this world. Some of you are not doing as well. Some of you are looking for ways to invest your money and be generous and provide for your children's children. Others are not sure they can pay rent next month. Or you are unhoused without a rent to pay.

Economies always have winners and losers. One of the reasons we keep turning back to the stories in Scripture is that they connect us with what God is doing. They lift our head above the details of our day to day circumstances to ask the big question: what is God's story here? Where is God in your story?

The Hebrews were starving. Then they were feasting. Then they were oppressed. But all the while, God's story was moving forward. Each chapter brought completely different circumstances, but the same God and the same goal.

If COVID has taught us anything, it's that anything can change at any moment. Who knows where our lives will lead? Jesus talked about a rich man who had so much that he built bigger barns only to die before he could enjoy any of it.

We don't know the details and our stories, but we know that God's story will continue. We can trust in God's story for his glory, and we know that God is good. Ultimately, his story ends with our being blessed with a life in eternity that we can't even begin to understand here and now.

A place prepared

Let's see what God has to say about land and economy and how it works in his kingdom. What is true in the kingdom of God?

God promised his people a Land of Promise. But when he brought them into that land, this is what he told them:

Leviticus 25:23:

“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me.

God never allowed his people to sell the land because the land belongs to God. We are but strangers and sojourners on it.

Some of you have a piece of paper that you think is very important. This document uses formal language to say that you own a piece of this planet—a few thousand square feet or several acres or maybe multiple pieces of property. Around the world, only about 15% of the world's population have a similar kind of document.³

But don't be fooled. You don't own anything.

Some of you really wish you had a piece of paper like that. You think that if you had a piece of paper like that, everything would be different. And within the constantly changing circumstances of this life, things might be a bit different.

But don't be fooled. Nothing eternal would be different if you had that piece of paper.

Remember how I told my children that they didn't have a room? The truth is their mother and I don't either. In the grand scheme of things, none of us has rights to anything. The land belongs to God. He provides it for his creation out of his love and grace. But don't be fooled. We don't own anything.

When Jesus comes to earth, he taps into that desire to have a place, but he changes our orientation. Instead of focusing on the land underneath our feet, he points us toward the land of his kingdom. Listen to what he says in John 14.

John 14:3:

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Let's think about what Jesus is saying and see how it connects with our story way back in Genesis. Jesus is on earth with his disciples when he says this. Then he dies, he is resurrected, and he disappears. But these words tell us what he is doing right now. He is preparing a place for us. He is somewhere else, but we will come again and take us to be with him.

Does that sound familiar at all? Joseph was with his brothers in the land of Canaan. Then, he died, or at least his father thought he had died. Joseph went away, but while he was there, he was preparing a place so that his

family could join him and live the blessings of the good life with him years later.

What happened when they joined him? They were fruitful and multiplied. That's the first thing God told people to do when he created them. This was the original calling of humankind. Now, living in Egypt, they are able to do what they were always meant to do.

This is the story of God. We are not yet where we were meant to be. We have to figure out how to be here. We live within an earthly economy. We can't ignore that. Because we know about God's kingdom, we can do our best to make this economy more like his.

Our ultimate home is in the kingdom of God. Even here, we live in God's economy. We have to keep remembering that.

In our earthly economy, there's never enough. In God's economy, there is plenty for everyone. On earth, we fight over the land. In God's economy, he gives us what we need. In this economy, some end up winners and some end up losers. In God's economy, we are all equal.

Jesus told his followers in John 16:33, "In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Our ultimate goal is to keep our eyes on Jesus. Pay attention to the story that he is writing for his glory. We belong to God. All that we have belongs to him. He provides for us. He gives us what we need to be truly human. Most of that can't even be touched or felt.

My friend who recently suffered identity theft told me that this was happening for him. His terrible circumstances, and they are terrible, were helping him to loosen his grip on the stuff of this earth.

This is the Kingdom Economy. This is God's story, and it all serves his glory. Eventually, all those who accept his offer of salvation will enter into the place he has prepared for them.

Conclusion

Let's think for a minute back to my transition from fifth grade to sixth grade. I went from the top to the bottom. After a few years, things got better. I wouldn't say that I reached the pinnacle of school life, but I developed a good set of friends and enjoyed myself.

You never know where things will lead. Our lives go through ups and downs. Some of those are due to our choices. Some of them are completely random. And some of them are really hard to pick apart.

But the one thing we know through it all is that God's plan is moving steadily forward. All of this is God's story for his glory. That should give us great comfort. It should give us great freedom. We can take risks; we can make decisions; we can reach out to others. We know that whether our circumstances trend upward or downward, God is good through it all.

We can't ignore the reality of life on earth. All of this matters. But in the midst of it, our eternal lives are being lived in a kingdom economy. There is always enough. We can all contribute. Each of us will get our fair share. And we will enjoy what we need.

Endnotes

1. Suze Orman, "Suze Orman's Twelve Steps to Wealth, Step Seven," Oprah.com, <https://www.oprah.com/money/suze-ormans-twelve-steps-to-wealth-step-seven>.
2. Kevin Cahill, "Who owns the world?," *Newstatesman.com*, March 17, 2011. <https://www.newstatesman.com/global-issues/2011/03/land-queen-world-australia>.
3. Kevin Cahill, *Who Owns the World: The Surprising Truth About Every Piece of Land on the Planet* (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing 2010), Back Cover.