

THE SCROLLS

Making Lemonade: Finding Faith When Life Turns Sour | Genesis 47:13-31

Life Lesson

True security is not found in our earthly resources, but in complete surrender to our Sovereign King. When the severe famine took away the Egyptians' silver, livestock, and land, they found safety and life only by trusting in Joseph's care, crying out, "You have saved our lives!" In contrast, while Israel's family thrived in the comforts of Goshen, the dying patriarch Jacob refused to let Egypt be his final resting place, insisting on being buried in Canaan. This dual story challenges us to let go of self-reliance during life's famines, while loosely holding the fleeting blessings of this world, permanently anchoring our hearts to God's eternal promises.

Examine Scripture

Read Genesis 47:13-31

As you read Scripture, slow down and ask these three questions to move from information to transformation:

1. **What does this passage reveal about who God is?**
2. **How is God calling you to grow or change?**
3. **What is God leading you to do or who is He calling you to be in your everyday life?**

-From the Sermon Series Bookmark and Sermon Notes

Staying Cool in Certain Uncertainties

How do we live faithfully when the world around us is shaking? In Genesis 47:13-31, we find ourselves at a dramatic crossroads where two very different kingdoms meet. On one side is Egypt, the undisputed superpower of the ancient world, collapsing under the weight of a catastrophic, multi-year famine. On the other side is Jacob's small, fragile family, living as foreign guests in Egypt's most fertile land.

This passage is an excellent study in contrasts, structured around two distinct movements. First, in (vs. 13-26), we observe Egypt's surrender. We watch as the desperate Egyptian citizens slowly lose their silver, livestock, land, and eventually their very independence to Pharaoh in exchange for bread. Through Joseph's wise and providential administration, we see a picture of survival through complete surrender.

Second, we observe the settling of Israel in (vs. 27-31). In stark contrast, God's covenant family is flourishing, multiplying, and gaining land. Yet, as the aging patriarch Jacob prepares to die, he refuses to let the comforts of Egypt dull his spiritual vision. He demands a solemn oath that he will not be buried in pagan soil but in the Land of Promise.

As you go through this study, you will discover that it is more than just an ancient history lesson. It reflects our own lives. It challenges us to ask: When the systems of this world fail, where do we turn? And when we enjoy the blessings of our current "Egypt," does our heart stay anchored to our true, heavenly home? How do we remain calm amid certain uncertainties?

V. 13

Though in Chapters 45-46 we see a joyful reunion, Chapter 47 reminds us of the devastation and desolation that made it possible. (Verse 13) states: "But 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 situation is devastating and severe. There was no food in the entire region. Everybody was suffering. The famine was severe; it affected all of Egypt.

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The Hebrew word lahah (לָהָה) is translated as “exhausted.” It conveys the literal sense of being physically faint, spiritually drained, or driven to mad desperation by suffering. In the ancient world, regional famines led to complete systemic collapse. There were no global supply chains or modern humanitarian aid organizations to ease the impact. This shows the incredible dire and daunting situation of the famine.

This is the same dire and daunting situation we find ourselves in without Christ. Sin causes a spiritual famine within us. Sin causes us to be completely “exhausted.”

Vs. 14-15

As if the famine was not enough, the silver began to run dry in Canaan and Egypt. In other words, there was no more money. The people had no way to buy more grain. They were going to starve unless someone intervened.

When earthly security (“silver”) fails, human dependency is laid bare. The Puritans often remarked on how God strips away our paper and metal idols so that we might look to His hand alone. John Flavel wrote, “Worldly riches are like a shadow that fleeth away; when we think to hold them fastest, they vanish. Happy is that soul which hath its treasure laid up in the bank of heaven, where no famine can break through and steal.”

Vs. 16-26

With the silver gone, Joseph devises a plan for the people to exchange their livestock, a symbol of wealth, for grain to survive. Then, when they have no more livestock to give, Joseph plans for them to surrender their land, but they will still be able to farm the land and give Pharaoh a fifth of the crop. This was not charity, nor was it theft. It was a strategic plan that created wealth for Egypt and salvation for the people.

In agrarian societies, livestock served as both working capital and long-term security. People risked their livelihoods by trading their herds to survive. Joseph did not ruthlessly take them; he guided them through the hardest year of their lives. In (v. 17), the phrase “provided them with food” uses the Hebrew root nahal (נָהַל). Interestingly, this is the same word used in (Psalm 23:2) for a shepherd who “leads” or “guides” his sheep beside quiet waters.

The people willingly chose slavery over starvation. This acts as a powerful, living metaphor of the Gospel. We must come to the end of our own self-reliance, admitting we have nothing left to trade but our very selves, and surrender to the True King. Charles Spurgeon wrote, “We must be emptied of self before we can be filled with Christ. We must have our own righteousness broken in pieces before we can be

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clothed in the righteousness of God. The Egyptians gave up all—their money, their cattle, their lands, and their very selves—to Pharaoh, that they might live. Oh, that we were half as wise to give up all for Christ!”

The only exempt group from having to pay anything for food was the Egyptian priests. The Egyptian priesthood was highly privileged. They held hereditary lands and received food allowances (“allotments”) directly from Pharaoh. Thus, they did not have to sell their inheritance.

Joseph then imposed a tax on the people, taking a fifth of all they produced for Pharaoh. In the ancient world, a 20% tax (chomesh) on tenants was actually quite generous. Many regional rulers demanded up to 50% or more. In fact, the people in Egypt did not feel oppressed; instead, they rejoiced and praised Joseph: “You have saved our lives! We have found favor with our lord and will be Pharaoh’s slaves.” (v. 25). Walter Kaiser writes, “Joseph’s economic strategy was not an act of state-sponsored tyranny, but an act of merciful preservation. By placing them under a structured feudal system, Joseph provided them with seed, restored their productivity, and gave them a sustainable way forward, preserving their dignity through work rather than creating a culture of permanent dependency.”

Vs. 27-31

In (vs. 27-31), we see a contrast between the desolation of the Egyptians and the prosperity of the Israelites. Here, the story highlights the flourishing and fruitfulness of God’s people. While Egypt was being reorganized into a centralized state under a Pharaoh, the focus shifted back to the covenant family. God’s people were thriving in Goshen, yet Jacob’s heart remained elsewhere entirely.

Notice the striking juxtaposition in (v. 27): “Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen. They acquired property in it and became fruitful and very numerous.” Egypt is being dispossessed of its land, while Israel is acquiring property. The Egyptians sold themselves into servitude; the Hebrews were multiplying in freedom. In (v. 28), we see that God’s grace is beautifully symmetrical. Jacob spent the first 17 years of Joseph’s life raising him in Canaan; now, Joseph spends the last 17 years of Jacob’s life caring for him in Egypt.

In (v. 29), Jacob asks for a promise from Joseph: “When the time came for him to die, he called his son Joseph and said to him, ‘If I have found favor with you, put your hand under my thigh and promise me that you will deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt.’” Jacob uses the meaningful pairing of “kindness and faithfulness” for the Hebrew *chesed we-emet* (often translated elsewhere as “mercy and truth”). This represents the core covenant-keeping qualities of God Himself. In the ancient patriarchal world, placing a hand “under the thigh” (*yarek*) was an especially serious way of

Personal Reflection

1. What is your modern “silver”—the earthly security, comfort, or routine you tend to trust over God? How does God sometimes use seasons of “exhaustion” or scarcity to break that self-reliance?
2. Is there a part of your life right now, such as a relationship, a career, or a deeply held fear, that you are desperately trying to control instead of surrendering to the lordship of Christ?
3. When you experience seasons of material blessing, comfort, or success, how do you intentionally prevent your heart from sinking its roots too deeply into this world?
4. If someone examined how you spend your time, money, and emotional energy, would they conclude that your ultimate treasure is in the temporary comforts of this world (“Egypt”) or in the eternal promises of God (“Canaan”)?
5. When reflecting on the “lean years” and the “plentiful years” of your life, what particular signs of God's care and provision make you feel grateful today?

Commentaries

*Expositor's Bible Commentary
(Abridged Edition): New Testament*
Edited by Kenneth Barker

New Bible Commentary Edited by D. A. Carson

NIV Application Commentary:
Genesis by John H. Walton

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making an oath, also seen in (Genesis 24:9). The “thigh” or loins symbolized the seat of generative life and physical procreation. To swear on the loins of the patriarch was to swear by his future descendants—and, ultimately, by the covenant promise of the coming “Seed” (Jesus Christ). It was also a sign of deep respect and submission.

Egypt was the richest empire on earth, and Goshen was its most fertile province. Yet, Jacob wanted to be buried in a dark cave in Machpelah (Canaan). He refused to call Egypt home. His burial request was a powerful statement of faith: God's promises are true, and Canaan is our real home.

In (v. 31), Jacob made Joseph swear to do as he had asked: “So, Joseph swore to him. Then Israel bowed in thanks at the head of his bed.” The Hebrew word for “bed” is *mittah* (מִטָּה). However, the ancient Septuagint (Greek) translators pointed the Hebrew consonants differently, reading it as *matteh* (מַטֵּה), which means “staff.” This is why Hebrews 11:21 quotes this moment as Jacob “worshiping, leaning on the top of his staff.” The CSB reads: “Then Israel bowed in thanks at the head of his bed.” Whether Jacob bowed over his bed or leaned on his pilgrim's staff, the posture signifies deep worship. He was thanking God for fulfilling His promise to preserve the line of Abraham. As Matthew Henry explains: “He that had wrestled with God, and prevailed, now bows to God in humble, thankful submission. He dies not in fear, but in faith, looking beyond Egypt's graves to the heavenly Canaan.” It is a beautiful, quiet image that captures the essence of a life well-lived: an old, weary patriarch bowing in worship at the head of his bed.

The contrast shown in this chapter reveals an enduring spiritual truth. The people of Egypt gave up everything they had to a worldly king just to get through a temporary crisis. Jacob, on the other hand, spent his final moments looking beyond the temporary safety of Pharaoh's rule to secure an everlasting inheritance for future generations. Egypt provided him with a life of comfort, but Canaan captured his heart because it represented God's promise.

This passage reminds us of two major truths. First, we must trust the Shepherd during times of famine. If you are walking through a season of lack, exhaustion, or broken self-reliance, remember how Joseph preserved his people. Jesus, our True Joseph, is not a harsh tyrant; He is the Good Shepherd who leads us through the leanest years and uses our brokenness to draw us into complete surrender to Him. Second, keep your eyes on the promise. If you are currently enjoying a season of prosperity and comfort in “Goshen,” do not let this world become your resting place. Enjoy God's provisions, but keep your heart anchored to His ultimate promises. Like Jacob, may our lives be lived with our hands loosely gripping the wealth of this world, and may our final posture always be one of grateful worship—leaning on the faithfulness of the God who has shepherded us all our days.