

# Gracious Slavery – Genesis 47:13-26

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## The Idea of Slavery

Is there any good in the idea of slavery? Now, I want you to contemplate on that for a moment and not just immediately react. You see, for many of us, our first reaction is NO! There is never any good in the idea of slavery! That is because we have been raised in a culture where freedom is the ultimate good, which means that slavery is the ultimate evil. In fact, by me asking this question, you may jump to the conclusion that I am in favour of slavery just because I would ask such a bold question, but I am not. I just want us to stop and think about the question, “Is there any good in the idea of slavery”, because this passage talks about people voluntarily going into slavery.

For us, this is unthinkable and even highly offensive. Some people may consider this a reason to not read the Bible, because it contains a passage where people think it is a good idea to become slaves. Others read this passage and can't believe that Joseph didn't just give the grain away. Here in Australia, we are used to Centrelink. And right now, because of COVID-19, the government is giving people (and businesses) money in the hope of keeping the economy going. This means that the government is helping people in their time of need. Why couldn't Joseph do that kind of thing? Why couldn't he simply provide the food that people needed without making them slaves? I mean, Joseph had been a slave! He knew how terrible it was. He wanted his freedom and then when he got it, he made other people slaves! It seems a stupid question to ask, but given the subject of this passage, it is worth asking, “Is there any good in the idea of slavery?”

## Running out of Money

In the story so far, we have seen Joseph go from being a slave in prison, to becoming the Governor of Egypt – the second most powerful man in the world at that time. Joseph was in charge of making sure that Egypt would survive the 7 years of famine by collecting lots of grain during the 7 years of good crops. When the people began to run out of food, they would go to Joseph and ask to buy some food so that they could survive. An example of this is seen in Joseph's brothers coming to buy food. When they began to run out of food, Jacob sent Joseph's brothers to buy some food from Egypt. They went and bought food and returned home with the food to their families. When they ran out of food again, they had to go back to Egypt and buy more food. By the time we get to Genesis 47, we find that Joseph's whole family had moved to Egypt, where they would be looked after in the land of Goshen. Our best guess would be to say that the famine had probably been going for a few years and there was probably 3 or 4 years of the famine to go and I think that the second half of chapter 47 is a summary of those final years. So, we are told that there was no food left in Egypt and Canaan, except for the food which Pharaoh had. People had gone to Joseph several times to buy their food, but it got to a point where they also ran out of money to buy their food.

*Genesis 47:15* When the money of the people of Egypt and Canaan was gone, all Egypt came to Joseph and said, "Give us food. Why should we die before your eyes? Our money is all gone."

They begged Joseph for food, and we would say that Joseph should have just given them the food to eat, but it was not his food to give, it was Pharaoh's food.

## Not an Easy Job

We must always remember that Joseph was living and working in a kingdom, where Pharaoh was the king. Pharaoh was in charge of the great empire of the time. The thing about kings and empires is that they rule over others. They dominate. And if they do not remain strong, they get attacked, invaded, and destroyed. So, ancient kings and their kingdoms were about power and strength. Now, if you were part of a good, strong,

stable kingdom, then you had peace and prosperity, but if you were part of a weaker kingdom then you might live in fear of being overrun and destroyed by a more powerful kingdom.

It is important to recognise that Egypt was not a socialist country. Otherwise, they might have taken everyone's grain and then redistributed it so that everyone had enough to eat. You have to recognise that would mean giving 100% of your grain to the state so that the state could control its redistribution. But, of course, if there was no grain to be taken because of the famine, there would not have been any grain to redistribute.

It is also important to recognise that Egypt was not a democracy. A democracy is a government of the people, where people are elected into power to govern the society for a certain period of time. If Egypt was a democracy, then Pharaoh and Joseph would have been elected to make sure that the grain which was collected from the people would be distributed back to the people in their time of need.

But the grain was not the people's grain. No, the grain was Pharaoh's grain and as a king it was his to keep or sell as he saw fit and Joseph was in charge of Pharaoh's grain supplies. So, Joseph had a difficult but important job to do. He had to help keep Pharaoh's kingdom strong and healthy by making sure that Pharaoh remained powerful and strong as a King. But he also had to care for the people and make sure that they survived the famine as well. Otherwise, Pharaoh would not have had any people left in his kingdom for him to rule over. And if they had all starved to death, then there would have been no one left to help Pharaoh defend his empire. Joseph's job was not as simple as we might think it should have been. And we have to be careful to really understand the system Joseph was in before we judge him too harshly for allowing people to volunteer into slavery.

## **Asset Rich, Cash Poor**

Well, in the course of time, after they had returned again and again to buy the grain they needed for food, the people finally ran out of money to buy food. So, Joseph decided that he would trade their livestock for grain.

*Genesis 47:17* So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and he gave them food in exchange for their horses, their sheep and goats, their cattle and donkeys. And he brought them through that year with food in exchange for all their livestock.

We might look at verse 15 and hear the pleas of the people when they ran out of money and think it was cruel for Joseph to trade their livestock for food. But think about it. If nobody has any money, then the people could not sell their livestock to anybody else except Joseph to get enough money to buy the grain. It would be like us saying, "Well, let's sell our car so that we can have enough money to survive the year." But the car, that was once worth \$65000, is now worthless. You cannot even get \$5000 for it, because no one has \$5000 to buy it. This is called being asset rich but cash poor. The Egyptians had assets they could not sell and no money to pay for grain. To our eyes, taking their livestock for grain could be seen as taking advantage of the people. But Joseph used what the people had to help them survive another year while still looking after Pharaoh's wealth and power. This was a good thing to do because a strong Pharaoh, a strong empire, meant peace and stability through troubled times and Joseph used what little the people had to help them pay for the grain which fed them for an entire year.

## **Grain for Growth**

But then the people ran out of livestock to trade and though the famine was nearing its end, it was not over yet. The people came back to Joseph and said...

**Genesis 47:18-19** *"We cannot hide from our lord the fact that since our money is gone and our livestock belongs to you, there is nothing left for our lord except our bodies and our land. <sup>19</sup> Why should we perish before your eyes-- we and our land as well? Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh. Give us seed so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate."*

Because we hate slavery so much all we can see in this statement is the terrible thought that the people were so desperate that they were willing to sell themselves into slavery. Because of this we can miss an important bit of information which helps us understand the hope they had despite offering themselves into slavery. Up to this point in the story, the people had simply bought and traded grain to eat in order to survive. That was because there was a famine in the land.

Now, we do not know what caused the famine. Normally, famine is caused by lack of rain, but this is not mentioned at all in the story, and no one is crying out for water, only food. So, the famine could have been caused by other things. Maybe the soil had gone bad and lost its nutrients, maybe there had been an infestation of bugs or locusts eating the grain over several years, maybe there had been a disease in the plants which meant they didn't produce properly. Whatever it was, throughout the famine people were only trading for grain to eat, not grain to plant. But now, towards the end of the famine, they were asking for grains of seed they could plant so that the land would not become desolate, like a wasteland.

**Genesis 47:23-24** *Joseph said to the people, "Now that I have bought you and your land today for Pharaoh, here is seed for you so you can plant the ground. <sup>24</sup> But when the crop comes in, give a fifth of it to Pharaoh. The other four-fifths you may keep as seed for the fields and as food for yourselves and your households and your children."*

I don't know if there was some kind of signal in the land that the people recognised, which said that the famine was coming to an end. Maybe they just knew they were in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> year and that the famine would soon be over. Whatever it was, both the people and Joseph recognised that it was now time to start planting again. The grain was not just for eating, it was for planting and making more grain. But they could not buy the seed to plant. All they had was themselves and their land. They needed to plant soon before they all died and the land would become like a desolate wasteland.

## **Terms of Bondage**

What we find difficult to understand is the idea of people selling themselves into slavery. This was a common practice in the ancient world. In desperate times, people would often sell themselves into slavery, at least for a period of time. Once that time was finished, they could either continue as slaves or they might be able to secure their freedom and make it again on their own terms as "freed-men". But Joseph's deal with the Egyptian people does not seem to be a short-term deal, this seems to be a long-term deal. The land and the people would be owned by Pharaoh. Of course, this was good for Pharaoh. They would now literally be his people and all the land of Egypt would literally be his land. Joseph had helped the power of Pharaoh and Egypt grow in a time of famine rather than getting weaker and smaller, which is something that would normally happen.

The people had given themselves over to slavery because the famine was too severe for the people to survive, but notice that Joseph's conditions for slavery were not too severe for the people to endure. The people had to give a fifth of their grain back to Pharaoh. That is, they had to pay a 20% tax on the grain that they grew. This means that they got to return to their own homes, their own land, and keep 80% of their produce. They are extremely good terms for slaves. Normally, a slave could not keep anything that he had produced. The slave, his family, his land all belonged to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh could have taken 100% of the

grain and returned whatever he thought was good enough for the slave to survive on. So, a 20% tax rate for a slave is extremely good. According to google, the current personal income tax rate in Egypt is 22.5%. So, not a lot has changed in terms of how much a person is supposed to give back to the government in Egypt even though the people are now considered “free”.

## Gracious Slavery

So, is there any good in the idea of slavery? Well, I would still want to say no, because while conditions for slaves might start off being good, an angry or vengeful master may make life terrible for the slave later on. The slippery slope of those with power oppressing the weak has been seen throughout history and I would not want to even consider the thought of slavery as something that should be used today. I also don't think that this passage is teaching us that slavery is good or that we should encourage different forms of slavery. This passage is simply a description of what Joseph did to help Egypt not only survive but prosper at a time when the Egyptian empire could have died a tragic death due to famine. Part of that survival was that people volunteered themselves into slavery, but that doesn't mean that the passage is promoting slavery.

But what we can learn from this passage was how gentle and generous the bonds of slavery were. Joseph had been gracious on the people while still helping Pharaoh. You see, Joseph knew what it was like to be sold into slavery, but he did not do it voluntarily. Joseph knew what it was to be like to be forced away from his family and homeland, but Joseph allowed the people to return to their homes and to farm the land they had previously owned. Joseph knew what it was like to have no freedoms, but Joseph gave people the ability to do whatever they liked with 80% of their crops. Yes, the people were technically slaves, but Joseph showed them a lot of grace as slaves.

## All Are Slaves

This makes me think of another chapter in the Bible which talks about grace and slavery.

**Romans 6:16-18** *Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey-- whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? <sup>17</sup> But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. <sup>18</sup> You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

Paul tells us that we are all slaves, either to sin or to righteousness. The problem is that our slavery does not just demand 20% of ourselves, it demands 100%. Whether we are slaves to sin or to righteousness, our whole self is affected.

**Romans 6:22-23** *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

So, while our slavery is complete slavery, slavery to sin leads to death, but the gift of God is eternal life. Followers of Jesus have been given a gracious gift. We might be slaves to God and his ways of righteousness, but this comes because the terms of our slavery are filled with grace and generosity.