

The Cost of Famine

Genesis 47:13-31

The Great Irish famine lasted from 1845-1850 and was one of the last great famines in western Europe. It resulted in the deaths of 1 million people and the emigration of another 2 million. The 'Great Hunger' as it was known, not only had a socioeconomic impact on Ireland but international ramifications as well as it led to the emigration of Irish people that changed countries from North America to Australia.

At the time, Ireland was predominantly a peasant society comprised of 75% Catholics and 25% Protestants. Protestants were the landowning elites while the Catholics served as tenants and worked the land. There was little industry in Ireland and much of the population depended on the potato to make a living with most of them living in abject poverty. The potato blight was accidentally brought to Europe in 1845 from South America and found its way to Ireland in the summer of 1846 causing the crop to fail in many areas resulting in widespread hunger during the winter months in rural Ireland.

The British government who controlled Ireland purchased large quantities of corn to send as relief to help the starving Irish. The blight was so severe that the crops failed again the following year. Many of the starving moved from rural communities to urban centers looking for food. A change in British administration made matters worse. The new administration changed its relief efforts by reducing the amount of food sent to impoverished areas forcing more people to move to cities resulting in greater starvation. Epidemic diseases such as typhus affected the malnourished and poor population who were moving into the urban areas spreading the infectious diseases to those locations as well. By 1850 when the blight had ended, 1 million people had died and Ireland was changed forever. Economists estimate that in many respects Ireland has still not recovered even to this day.

One of the greatest economic impacts of the famine was a change in landholding and agriculture. The vast majority of Irish families lived on farms that were less than two acres. After the famine it was no

longer possible to be self-sustaining on two acres so farms became larger to ensure they could provide an income that could sustain them. Consequently, the landowners who mostly lived in London, converted their land from farming to rearing livestock because that was more profitable. This shift led to greater unemployment and resulted in Ireland remaining poverty stricken.

The size of families was another consequence of the famine. Before the famine, people married young and had lots of children. After the famine, they married later and had smaller families to avoid another family crisis. If they had little chance of getting a decent sized farm, they didn't marry at all. The high rate of unmarried single people led to many social problems, especially increased alcoholism.

The famine had an impact on religion. It was already a very religious people, but after the famine it became even more so. Some scholars suggest that the famine caused people to turn to religion for even greater support. In the decades following the famine Catholics became known for their strict observance of their faith. Each year thousands became priests and nuns and the priests became powerful in Irish life. Their strict interpretation of their religion and growing influence in society worried Protestants which led to increasing tension between the two groups well into the twentieth century. But one thing they agreed on was their anti-British sentiment and the emergence of extreme violence through the likes of the Irish Republican Army.

Widespread emigration continued in the decades following the famine. In 1840 the population was 8 million, but by 1960 it had decreased to 4.5 million despite a high birthrate. This impacted the population in many countries around the world, helping their new homelands to expand as they were part of the movement to settle new frontiers, but their presence also created a growing tension where Protestant communities already existed.

A famine anywhere in the world leaves a global imprint that affects other countries as well. Countries all over the world are affected. Even this

pandemic has created a famine like feel that has created a socioeconomic impact. Unemployment, fluctuating stocks, business closures, fear, tension, inability to purchase needed items, and the uncertainty about needed medical care other than COVID related illness are just some of the prevailing conditions. Economists can only speculate about the long-term ramifications while medical personnel are telling us to brace for round two. Each of us has felt it to one degree or another, but nothing like what occurred in Ireland and certainly not to the degree it affected life in Egypt in Joseph's day.

We are in **Genesis 47** this morning. Remember that when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers there was still five years remaining in this famine. The family had all moved down to Egypt and received the blessing of Pharaoh to live in Goshen. Joseph had skillfully positioned Egypt to sustain them through the duration of the famine. Even people from the surrounding countries came to buy food. While the grain didn't run out, the money eventually did. Without the ability to earn money, any savings were depleted over time and that's what happened and that's where we pick up our account in **verse 13** looking at physical famine in the land.

I. PHYSICAL FAMINE IN THE LAND

Before the famine even began, during the seven years of bounty, Joseph took the appropriate steps to save the nation. And now we will see the continuation of that economic plan as they navigate through the remaining years of the famine.

We read in **verse 13** that there was no food in the whole region because of the severity of the famine. Severity is a word that means to cause distress by extreme conditions. Some synonyms include acute, grave, critical, dire, grievous, harsh, and bitter. There was no food to be found anywhere except in the collection sites established by Joseph to store the grain from the seven years of plenty. The severity of the situation extended from Egypt to Canaan and our text describes for us that the land wasted away. It means to dwindle away to nothingness, to wither away. The Cambridge

dictionary defines it as gradually getting thinner and weaker. Sit a piece of fruit or a vegetable on the counter and over time you can witness the life juices drying up as it shrivels away. The land was in a state of decay and ruin. Nothing could grow. It was getting thinner and weaker.

[I was reading an article this past week about llamas and camels. There is a certain species of camel that can survive in a desert that hasn't seen rain in 50 years. Talk about severe conditions.](#)

Joseph will take actions to bring everything under the rule of Pharaoh in order to save the nation from abject ruin. Joseph has been through a number of personal crises and through them he has displayed tremendous poise and faith. He has been tasked with guiding the Egyptians through a national crisis and he does so with remarkable wisdom.

Please understand that the actions Joseph takes in this chapter are not for his own personal gain but for the benefit of Egypt for long term prosperity. In this section we see first that Joseph meets a problem.

A. Joseph Meets a Problem – vs. 14-26

We have already considered that the socioeconomic impact on a nation, even on the world is significant. In the following verses we note how Joseph takes steps to ensure that the nation not stall into total collapse or bankruptcy. In **verses 14-15** Joseph controls their pocketbook.

1. Joseph controls their pocketbook – vs. 14-15

They needed food, they took money and made a purchase, but eventually they ran out of money. Every piggy bank, mason jar, tin can and bank vault was emptied. Some ran out of money faster than others, but in the end, everyone was reduced to the same level of having no money. There was no longer a difference between the rich and the poor, there were just people and Pharaoh owned it all.

[You have no doubt gone into stores and seen signs indicating that there is a national coin shortage. Fox Business reports that the reason for this shortage is because coins are not being put into circulation due](#)

to a couple of factors. One is that some stores have temporarily stopped payment of goods by money. They are only accepting debit or credit cards. The other factor is that in the early days of the pandemic many stores were closed and people were restricted in travel. Fewer people, fewer purchases.

When all the money ran out, they came to Joseph for help. They had no monetary means to purchase grain and they begged Joseph to help them out of this predicament so that they wouldn't die before his eyes. He controlled their pocketbook.

The next thing Joseph did was control their possessions.

2. Joseph controls their possessions – vs. 16-17

Every bleat, every oink, every moo – all their animals were sold to buy grain. I imagine they set up some scale to weigh the animals. A certain amount of grain was made in exchange for the type and weight of animal brought. The benefit to their selling all the livestock was that the animals could be kept alive during the famine.

Scripture is silent so we can only speculate, but what did Joseph do with all this livestock? Did he have large pens built to care for the animals or did he have the Egyptians keep them and tend them even though they belonged to Pharaoh? The only thing we are told is that now all the animals belonged to Pharaoh in exchange for the grain.

I'm only guessing here, but I have to think that people really began to skimp on things to hold on to as much as they could for as long as they could. When resources are scarce you don't live high on the hog, as the saying goes. Things that were once luxuries gave way to things that were necessities.

We saw that to a degree during the early days and weeks of the pandemic. Limited to where people could go, people stocked up on, even hoarded things like toilet paper and hand sanitizer. Those items became the new gold. Staples flew off shelves as fast as they could be stocked. You were fortunate to be at the store and get a pound of burger or a box of noodles. Manufacturing was affected, which

affected shipping, which affected availability.

The Egyptians had no money so they sold their possessions in exchange for food. You have to wonder what others sold who didn't tend livestock. Did they barter jewelry or heirlooms? In time even their possessions ran out and once more they came to Joseph asking for help, begging for food.

He controlled their pocketbooks and their possessions. Then he controlled their property and their person.

3. Joseph controls their property and their persons – vs. 18-22

Since they couldn't grow anything, the land had no value, so they traded it for grain. That was the only profit to them.

In addition, they sold themselves as Pharaoh's servants. He took their land and their labor.

Now I want to point something out that I haven't noticed in all the previous times reading this passage until my study this past week. Joseph sold them grain in exchange for their money and their livestock. But I want you to notice that when it came to the land and themselves, it was their idea. Notice again in **verses 18-19**.

Chuck Swindoll states something important to keep in mind, especially when thinking about Joseph's character. He writes: **"You don't take advantage of people who are at your mercy."** Joseph treated them with dignity. There is nothing more demeaning than having nothing. It can leave a person feeling worthless and no self-esteem. Joseph wanted them to see that they still had value. If you want a contented people, treat them with respect and dignity. Joseph treated them with integrity. Yes, they were in dire straights, but that was no reason to take advantage of them. We saw that in how he treated Potiphar and his wife as a slave, in how he worked in prison, in how he treated his brothers, and we see it here in how he treated the people.

The only exception to those selling land for food were the priests. They kept the land that had been

allotted to them by Pharaoh. He believed the government should support the religious leaders.

Joseph took control of their pocketbook.
He took control of their possessions.
He took control of their property and their persons.
He also took control of their production.

4. Joseph controls their production – vs. 23-26

Back in **Genesis 41:33-34** Joseph recommended that a temporary law be established requiring 1/5th of all production to be taxed and stored in large warehouses in anticipation of the famine. Now Joseph was making it a permanent law. He would give the people grain to plant and from each harvest 1/5th of all production would be given to the state as a tax. They would live off the rest. If you think 20% was a bit steep to pay, records indicate that it was not uncommon in Mesopotamia in that time period to pay anywhere between 40-60% in taxes.

Henry Morris suggests that “this was not excessive in terms of present-day standards, especially since these farmers had no rent to pay for property that now belonged to Pharaoh, there was no cost on investment or upkeep, in fact they had nothing except their own personal expenses.”

Morris also notes that Joseph created a type of feudal society. Doling out goods for free would have destroyed their personal and national morale and bankrupted the economy and government. It would have most likely ended with social anarchy. The food would have been depleted and mass starvation would have followed.

Egypt needed a man with moral and ethical integrity and that person was a foreigner, who became a slave then a prisoner, then a prince of Egypt. They needed someone who wouldn't rip them off, someone who looked beyond his own self-interest and self-preservation to the needs of others and that person was Joseph.

Warren Wiersbe states that the person with integrity has a single heart, he is single minded, and has a

single will. He loves God and not things. He keeps the right things in focus and keeps life in the right direction. He serves one master.

Chuck Swindoll concludes by noting “with a single heart, mind, and will Joseph dealt fairly and honestly with all those who trusted him with their money. When they held up their hands and passionately declared, ‘We’ll do anything!’ he remained fair and compassionate.”

What we find in **verse 25** is an affirmation by the people accepting the terms. They recognized that Joseph had treated them fairly. The people worked their own land and gave Pharaoh 20% from which to fund the government.

Joseph meets a problem.
Joseph makes a promise.

B. Joseph Makes a Promise – vs. 27-31

Here's something I don't quite understand and haven't got an answer for. The famine is raging throughout all the land, people are hungry, they're selling everything so that Pharaoh now owns it all. How is it then, that we read in **verse 27** that Israelites acquired property? A possible explanation lies back in **verse 11-12**. “So Joseph settled his father and his brothers in Egypt and gave them property in the best part of the land, the district of Rameses, as Pharaoh directed. Joseph also provided his father and his brothers and all his father's household with Food, according to the number of their children.”

Joseph was looking out for them they prospered. The family grew. And just like that Jacob is now 147 years old. The famine is over and they have been thriving in the land. We're told if there was any discussion about heading back to Canaan now that the famine had ended. But Jacob somehow sensed that his end was near, his time of death was at hand. He called for his son Joseph. He is now carrying the responsibility of the firstborn to make burial preparations. Reuben had forfeited that right as firstborn of Leah, but Joseph as firstborn of Rachel would carry that task. As they met, Jacob

spoke and made a request of Joseph. That's given to us in **verses 28-30**.

1. Jacob's request – vs. 28-30a

“Son, I’m about to die and want you to do something for me. As a way of keeping your word, put your hand under my thigh.” It’s the same gesture that Abraham asked his servant Eleazer to do before he sent him to get a wife for Isaac. “Son, promise me that you will not bury me here in Egypt, but instead, take me back to my home, back to Canaan. That’s where I want to be buried. I want to be buried with the rest of my kin folk.” He wanted to be buried in the promised land. We read in Hebrews 11 the words “by faith” and in the end of the chapter they were commended for their faith, even though none of them had received what was promised.

Jacob was promised a land for his descendants, a land he would never possess, but he wanted to be buried in that land as a way of demonstrating his faith that God’s promise would come true. It was a witness that he was not an idol worshipper, but a worshipper of the one true and living God.

Stop and think for a moment that your funeral, whenever that may be, are the last public testimony you will ever give. So live your life carefully.

Warren Wiersbe said “Making your last will and testament are important, but don’t neglect your last witness and testimony.”

Jacob wanted even his burial to be a witness of his faith in the promises of God regarding the land.

What is Joseph’s response? We see it in **vs. 30-31**.

2. Joseph’s response – vs. 30b-31a

It was not an unreasonable request that Jacob made. When I die, take me back to my homeland. Will you do that for me son?

Joseph’s response was a resounding yes, Dad, I’ll do it, I’ll do what you ask. He confirmed it with an oath, giving his father his word that it would be done just as he requested. Jacob’s response was one

of reverence. That ends the chapter.

3. Jacob’s reverence – v. 31b

When you come to the place of living by faith and the end is near, there is but one response, it is worship. There is a necessary pause that is filled with adoration and praise because God is worthy.

Worthy of worship, worthy of praise,
Worthy of honour and glory;
Worthy of all the glad songs we sing,
Worthy of all the offerings we bring.

*You are worthy, Father, Creator.
You are worthy, Saviour, Sustainer.
You are worthy, worthy and wonderful;
Worthy of worship and praise.*

Worthy of rev’rence, worthy of fear,
Worthy of love and devotion;
Worthy of bowing and bending of knees,
Worthy of all this and added to these.

*You are worthy, Father, Creator.
You are worthy, Saviour, Sustainer.
You are worthy, worthy and wonderful;
Worthy of worship and praise.*

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That’s how I want to go.

That’s how I want to be remembered.

I want there to be worship on my heart and praise on my lips. Even his worship was an act of faith as he trusted the promises of God.

There was famine in the land. It was devastating, yet God sustained His people through the skillful management of Joseph.

Now, let me close with this thought. Just like there can be physical famine in the land that can cause significant socioeconomic problems, there can also be spiritual famine in our life.

II. SPIRITUAL FAMINE IN OUR LIFE

Had the Egyptians been unwilling to make significant sacrifices, they would have starved from the famine.

If we are unwilling to make sacrifices in our lives, we will starve spiritually from a famine of the soul. We must be willing to surrender our pocketbook. We need to remember that as a Christ follower, every cent we have really belongs to God and be willing to surrender it to Him.

We need to remember that as a Christ follower, all our possessions really belong to God and be willing to surrender them to Him.

We need to remember that as a Christ follower, our lives belong to Him.

Romans 12:1 “I beseech ye therefore brethren by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God which is your reasonable service (act of worship – NIV).”

Have we come to that place where we have given God control of everything? Have we truly surrendered it all to Him? If not, then we are risking a spiritual famine to consume us.

To overcome a spiritual famine in our lives there are two things I would suggest to you today that must be done.

Jesus Himself tells us what the first thing is in his discussion with the disciples after his conversation with the woman at the well.

A. Do The Will of God – John 4:34
“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of Him who sent me and do His work.”

For the Egyptians to be spared from the famine, they had to listen to the will of Joseph. Even Pharaoh told them to go, listen and do what Joseph said they should do.

If we want to overcome a spiritual famine in our lives we must learn to listen and then do the will of God.

“Trust and obey for there’s no other way.”

John 14:21, 23-24a

Psalm 40:8 “I delight to do your will, O God, your law is within my heart.”

Can you say that your food, your spiritual nourishment comes from doing the will of God?
 If not, prepare for spiritual famine in your life.

In order to do the will of God, we must be in the Word of God.

B. Be In the Word of God

There are so many verses about our need to be in the Word of God and its benefit. Let me give a few.

Jeremiah 15:16 “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts.”

Ezekiel 3:1-3 “And he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.’ So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.’ So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.”

Psalm 1:3 “But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.”

We must do the will of God and be in the Word of God if we are to avoid a spiritual famine in our lives. And did you notice that the link to both doing the will of God and being in the Word of God is that it is our delight. Our response will then be like Jacob after we have learned to walk by faith and that is to worship God. **Will you pay the cost to keep the spiritual famine from consuming you?**