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# “When Church is Hard”

Genesis 47:13-25

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Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe. The land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. Joseph collected all the money to be 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.

When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, "Give us food! Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone."

And Joseph answered, "Give me your livestock, and I'll give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money's gone."

So, they brought their livestock to Joseph; and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys. That year he supplied them with food in exchange for all their livestock.

When that year was ended, they came to him the following year, and said to him, "We cannot hide from my lord that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord's. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate."

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he

*made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other.*

*Only the land of the priests he didn't buy; for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh, and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them. Therefore, they didn't sell their land.*

*Then Joseph said to the people, "Now that I have this day bought you and your land for Pharaoh, here's seed for you. Sow the land. And at the harvests you will give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths will be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones."*

*They said, "You have saved our lives; ay it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh."*

#### *Genesis 47:13-25*

"Success is like some horrible disaster worse than your house burning." That's how Malcolm Lowry put it. He has a point. It is not adversity that keeps the church from being the church God hopes we will be. It is success that leads to failure. Prosperity is quicksand.

Joseph's story is inspiring right up to the moment when he makes it big. Then his life becomes a warning about the dangers on Easy Street. Joseph is fine until everything is fine. Then he loses his way. He handles the hard times. The golden years are his downfall.

You remember the story. Joseph is too good for his brothers. He is the one who makes 100 on the test, ruins the curve, and smiles too much when the teacher

announces the grades. His over-indulgent father rewards him with a flashy coat with too many colors. His brothers do not want the valedictorian in their family, so they sell him as a slave.

Joseph perseveres through terrible times. He battles sibling rivalry, a lenient parent, overwhelming difficulties, and his own more than healthy ego. In Egypt he wins the respect of his master Potiphar. He becomes an administrator. He resists the flirtations of his boss' wife. Joseph's reward for his virtuous behavior is a prison sentence. He has survived his brothers and his boss's wife. Now he has to survive prison.

He does not let it break his spirit. Joseph interprets the butler's dream and thinks that will lead to his freedom, but the butler forgets and Joseph is in prison for two more years. Persecution brings out the best in Joseph. He still does not become resentful.

He rises above adversity again. He becomes Pharaoh's chief of staff in charge of the treasury department. Joseph is at the top of the heap. He has overcome a dysfunctional family and repeated injustice to become the second most powerful person in the world. He has blessed those who wronged him. He is in a position to do more good for more people than he ever imagined.

Joseph, once thrown into a well to die, once a slave, once a prisoner, now lives in Pharaoh's house. That is when the rags to riches story becomes a tragedy. When we tell Joseph's story in Sunday school we stop before we get to

the end. When the famine comes, starving Egyptians come begging for food. Joseph sells grain back to the people from whom he has taken it. They buy their own food until Joseph has all their money.

When they say, “Joseph, you’ve taken all our money,” he takes their livestock.

When they are hungry again, Joseph says, “I’ll give you food if you give me your land and become slaves.”

He has their money, cattle, property, and lives. He makes them tenant farmers on their own land. This one who has been a slave himself makes them slaves.

The text is filled with sarcasm: “Oh, Joseph, we’re so happy to be your slaves. Thank you for selling us the food we planted, tended, and harvested on land that should still be ours.”

Joseph was better at overcoming other people’s power than he was at overcoming his own power. He survived the desert and prison, but he could not survive prosperity.

Raymond Bailey writes: “When you drive Pharaoh’s cars, dress in Pharaoh’s clothes, and live in Pharaoh’s house, it’s hard not to act like Pharaoh.”

It is hard for the church to act like God’s people when they live in Pharaoh’s house. Prosperity is more damaging than persecution. Churches do better in hard times. When Christians were being executed for their faith, you could be certain that the people who were in worship on Sunday morning were serious about their commitment. When Christians stop being persecuted, they usually stop being

the church and start persecuting others.

When Martin Luther was fed up with the corruption of the church, he was courageous and his life was threatened. But when Luther gained power and moved into Pharaoh's house, he demanded that the Emperor take stern measures against other Christians. Luther became anti-Semitic.

Churches are at the best when they are fighting the establishment. Christians overcome persecution, poverty, and adversity, but when they move into Pharaoh's house, they stop being Christ's church. When church is easy, members talk about the church more than they act like the church. When church is easy, members think their job is to pass judgment on what they like and what they don't. When church is easy, members focus on secondary issues. Buildings, budgets, policies and practices are important only when they help the church act like God's people.

When it is easy, churches are not always courageous in the face of racism, sexism, materialism. When it is easy, churches give the impression that having more people and more money is more important than becoming more like Christ. When it is easy, churches do not usually open the bank accounts to feed starving people, because it is easier to live in Pharaoh's house.

This church knew from the start that real church is hard. This congregation began with 21 people who wanted to fight slavery—daring to be the Grand Central Depot of the Underground Railroad and buying the freedom of enslaved people. Enemies threatened to murder the first

minister Henry Ward Beecher and burn Plymouth to the ground. The best moments in our congregation's history were when the church refused to follow Pharaoh's orders.

Success gets in the way of a church living out its purpose. Being on the winning side is hard for a congregation. After the Civil War was over, the church drew huge crowds. This sanctuary was filled twice each Sunday. Beecher's sermons were published in the newspaper, only in part because he was the editor. He was the highest paid minister in the United States.

But twelve years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Beecher was on trial for adultery. The 2½ year-long case had to keep the church from focusing on what the church should be and do.

If we could ask Beecher, "Which were the best years at Plymouth?" don't you think he would say, "When it was dangerous to be the church, when it was hard to do what was right, when we did the difficult things God calls us to do."

This church has been through hard times. Covid was hard for churches. The coronavirus damaged the economy, employment, social life, supply chains, academic programs, almost everything. Churches argued over how to respond to Covid. Churches struggled with giving. The average congregation has seen attendance decline by about a quarter since before the pandemic.

Covid was a horrible tragedy that forced churches to look for new ways to fulfill the mission of the church. We worked to worship in new ways. We shared what we had to feed the hungry. We formed groups to keep in contact

with those who were not getting much attention. During Covid, churches had to reset, pivot from old patterns, and recommit to being God's people. Churches were forced to focus on the mission of the church.

But now churches are tempted to go back to talking about less important things, and lose their focus on worship, service, and community. Churches that want it to be easy ask, "How do we recreate what we used to have?" Churches that know it is hard to follow Jesus, ask, "How can we be God's people?"

Being Christ's church is difficult, because it is hard to share with the poor, welcome the immigrant, and speak up for minorities. It is hard to feed the hungry, care for the sick, and love our neighbors.

Christ's church asks difficult questions: Do we come into this sanctuary and truly give ourselves in worship? Do we take the story of Jesus seriously? Are we invested in the ministries we share? Are we teaching our children to care for the needy? Are we reaching out to people who have given up on the church? Are we giving sacrificially? Are we listening to the Spirit? Are we remaining true to the gospel even though our culture has a different definition of success? Are we courageously living out our calling or are we living comfortably in Pharaoh's house?

Our church anniversary is a chance to hear the Spirit saying, "If we really believe this stuff, if we believe that God is at work through the church, if we believe we could live more joyful lives, then our job is to be God's people."

Our job is to do what Jesus did. We listen the way Jesus listened. We speak the way Jesus spoke. We love the way Jesus loved. We care for children and the elderly. We treat



everyone as equal. We make a place for the hurting. We come to this table and give ourselves to God's love.

*sermon © Brett Younger*