

# Introduction to Genesis Chapter 47

## *Jacob Before Pharaoh, the Family in Goshen, the Famine's Climax, and a Father's Final Request*

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Genesis chapter 47 moves the Joseph narrative into a new register: the administration of a nation-level crisis, the settlement of a family in a foreign land, and the beginning of the end of the patriarchal era. It contains four movements that are quite different in character but deeply connected in their theological significance. Jacob is presented to Pharaoh and blesses him — the lesser being blessed by the greater in a reversal of the expected political hierarchy. The covenant family is settled in Goshen with the best of Egypt's land and Joseph's provision. The famine reaches its catastrophic climax as Joseph administers the grain system that eventually transfers all private property in Egypt to Pharaoh. And Jacob, in old age, asks Joseph to swear that he will bury him not in Egypt but in the land of his fathers.

The encounter between Jacob and Pharaoh is one of the most remarkable scenes in the chapter. Jacob is a refugee patriarch arriving in Egypt under the provision of Pharaoh's hospitality. Pharaoh is the most powerful ruler in the ancient world. And yet the dynamic of the encounter is not what the social hierarchy would suggest: Jacob blesses Pharaoh, twice. Pharaoh receives the blessing. Hebrews 7:7 establishes the principle that the lesser is blessed by the greater — which means Jacob's blessing of Pharaoh establishes Jacob as the greater in the encounter. The covenant person, the bearer of the Abrahamic promise that all nations will be blessed through Abraham's descendants, blesses the most powerful king on earth.

Pharaoh's question — how old are you? — and Jacob's answer are among the most theologically dense exchanges in the chapter. Jacob is one hundred and thirty years old. The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult. Jacob's self-description as a pilgrim — a sojourner, a traveler without a permanent home — is the defining characterization of the patriarchal experience throughout Genesis. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are all described as strangers and pilgrims in the land. Jacob's characterization of his years as few and difficult is not despair — it is honest assessment. The man who has wrestled with God and been renamed Israel, who lost his beloved wife Rachel and believed his beloved son Joseph was dead for twenty-two years, who has traveled from Haran to Canaan to Egypt, has lived the difficult years that the patriarchal life produced.

The administration of the famine in verses 13 through 26 is one of the most morally and historically complex passages in the Joseph narrative. As the famine deepens, the Egyptians and the people of Canaan exhaust their money, then offer their livestock, then offer their land and their freedom in exchange for grain. By the end of the famine, all the land in Egypt belongs to Pharaoh and all the people have become Pharaoh's servants — except the priests, whose land Joseph does not purchase. The passage has generated significant historical and ethical discussion. From one angle, Joseph saves the lives of the Egyptian population through a remarkably effective administrative system. From another angle, the system produces a form of debt slavery that concentrates enormous power in Pharaoh's hands.

The chapter closes with Jacob's request to Joseph: swear to me that you will not bury me in Egypt but will carry me back to the land of my fathers and bury me in the cave of Machpelah with Abraham and Isaac. The request reflects Jacob's faith in the covenant promise — that Canaan is the land of the promise, that his body belongs in the covenant geography, that even in death he is oriented toward the land that God has given and will give to his descendants. And it reflects the

intimacy of the father-son relationship restored after twenty-two years: not a legal document, not a witnessed formal declaration, but a personal oath sworn between a father and the son who almost died as a child. Joseph swears. And the chapter closes with Jacob worshiping, leaning on the top of his staff.

## Opening Prayer

*Heavenly Father,*

*As we open Genesis chapter 47, we come before You at the settled stage of the Joseph story — the family in Goshen, the famine at its height, Jacob and Pharaoh in conversation, and an old man asking his son to promise where he will be buried. Lord, let this chapter do its full work in us even in its more administrative register. The theology of the pilgrimage. The blessing of the powerful by the covenant person. The faithful death-request of a man who knows that his body belongs in the land of the promise even when he has spent his final years in Egypt.*

*Father, speak to us about Jacob's description of his years: few and difficult. The honest assessment of a man who has lived the patriarchal life with all its cost. Let us receive the honesty of that self-description as a permission to name our own difficult years honestly before You — not as a complaint but as a confession that the pilgrimage is real, that the years are difficult, and that the God who walked with Jacob through all of them is the same God who walks with us.*

*And Lord, speak to us about Jacob's death-request. The man who knows that his body belongs in the land of the promise, who asks his son to swear that he will be buried with Abraham and Isaac, who is oriented toward the covenant geography even at the end of his life in a foreign land. Give us that orientation — the sense that wherever we are currently living, our deepest belonging is to the covenant community and the covenant geography that God has promised. We are pilgrims. We are strangers in the land. And we are heading home.*

*In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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## Genesis 47:1–12 — Jacob Before Pharaoh: The Pilgrim Who Blesses the King

*(1) Joseph went and told Pharaoh, 'My father and brothers, with their flocks and herds and everything they own, have come from the land of Canaan and are now in Goshen.' (2) He chose five of his brothers and presented them to Pharaoh. (3) Pharaoh asked the brothers, 'What is your occupation?' They answered, 'Your servants are shepherds, just as our fathers were.' (7) Then Joseph brought his father Jacob in and presented him to Pharaoh. After Jacob blessed Pharaoh, (8) Pharaoh asked him, 'How old are you?' (9) And Jacob said to Pharaoh, 'The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers.' (10) Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went out from his presence. (11) 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. (12) Joseph also provided his father and his brothers and all his father's household with food, according to the number of their children.*

### The Context:

The presentation of the brothers to Pharaoh proceeds exactly as Joseph planned: they identify themselves as shepherds, Pharaoh asks them to settle in Goshen and oversee the royal livestock. The strategy Joseph outlined in chapter 46 has worked perfectly. The honest identification as shepherds — the occupation that Egyptians find detestable — has produced the settlement in Goshen that Joseph wanted. The family's distinctiveness is their protection: the thing that makes them

unacceptable for integration into Egyptian society is the thing that keeps them in the best pastoral land in Egypt.

The presentation of Jacob to Pharaoh is the chapter's most theologically significant encounter. Joseph brings his father in and Jacob blesses Pharaoh. The blessing comes before the conversation. The first act of the covenant patriarch in the presence of the most powerful ruler in the ancient world is an act of blessing — the deployment of the covenant promise that all nations will be blessed through Abraham's descendants. Pharaoh receives the blessing. He is being blessed through the covenant community that he has welcomed into his land. The Abrahamic promise of blessing to all nations is being quietly fulfilled in the governor's palace.

Pharaoh's question — how old are you? — is a social inquiry about the remarkable appearance of the ancient patriarch before him. Jacob's answer is one of the most theologically rich personal statements in Genesis. The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers. Three things are notable. First, Jacob describes his years as years of pilgrimage — the Hebrew is the same word used throughout the patriarchal narratives for the sojourn of the covenant people in the land that is not yet fully theirs. Jacob is a pilgrim. He has never had a permanent home. Second, he calls his years few and difficult — honest, not bitter. The man who wrestled with God knows the cost of the covenant life. Third, he acknowledges that his years are fewer than his fathers': Abraham lived to 175, Isaac to 180. Jacob will live to 147.

Jacob blesses Pharaoh again when he leaves. The double blessing — one when he enters, one when he leaves — establishes the pattern of the covenant person's relationship with the powerful: the covenant community blesses, and the blessing is real. Jacob carries the covenant promise of Abraham, and through that promise, the most powerful king in the world receives the blessing of the God of Israel. The settlement in the best part of the land follows — the district of Rameses, the finest agricultural territory in Egypt. Joseph provides food for the entire family according to the number of their children. The family of the covenant person is provisioned through the covenant person's position.

### **Plain American English:**

"Joseph went to Pharaoh and said: 'My father and my brothers have come from Canaan with all their flocks and herds and possessions. They are currently in Goshen.' He then took five of his brothers and presented them to Pharaoh. Pharaoh asked them: 'What do you do for a living?' They said: 'We are shepherds, just as our ancestors were.' Then Joseph brought his father Jacob and presented him to Pharaoh. Jacob gave Pharaoh his blessing. Pharaoh said to him: 'How old are you?' Jacob answered: 'My years of traveling through this world have been a hundred and thirty. They have been few and hard, and they do not add up to the years my ancestors lived as strangers in foreign lands.' Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh again and left his presence. Joseph settled his father and his brothers in Egypt and gave them property in the finest part of the land — the district of Rameses — just as Pharaoh had instructed. Joseph also provided food to his father and brothers and all his father's household according to how many children they had."

### **KEY OBSERVATIONS**

**"Then Joseph brought his father Jacob in and presented him to Pharaoh. After Jacob blessed Pharaoh":** This signifies The Covenant Patriarch Blessing the Most Powerful King in the World as the Deployment of the Abrahamic Promise to All Nations. The first act of the covenant patriarch in the presence of Pharaoh is not deference or petition. It is blessing. Jacob blesses the man who welcomed his family into Egypt. The Abrahamic promise — all nations will be blessed through you — is being fulfilled in this moment: the covenant community is blessing the nation that has given them refuge. Hebrews 7:7 establishes that the

lesser is always blessed by the greater, which means Jacob's blessing of Pharaoh places Jacob in the position of theological superiority regardless of the political hierarchy.

**"The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult":** This signifies The Honest Self-Assessment of the Covenant Life as One of Pilgrimage and Difficulty — Neither Romanticized Nor Despairing. Jacob does not say: my years have been blessed beyond measure. He does not say: my years have been a tragedy. He says: few and difficult. The honest assessment of the pilgrim life — the acknowledgment of its cost, its brevity, its difficulty — is not a failure of faith. It is the faith that is honest about the texture of the life it has lived. The covenant life is not promised to be easy. It is promised to be accompanied. Jacob knows both.

**"And they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers":** This signifies The Generational Context of Jacob's Self-Assessment — He Understands His Life as One Chapter in a Longer Covenant Story That Began Before Him. Jacob places his own life within the larger narrative of the patriarchal pilgrimage. His years are shorter than Abraham's and Isaac's. He is one chapter in a covenant story that spans multiple generations. The person who understands their own life as one chapter in a longer divine story — not the whole story, not the climax, but one chapter — is the person who can give an honest assessment of their own years without either inflating or despairing of them.

**"Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went out from his presence":** This signifies The Second Blessing as the Completion of the Covenant Encounter — Jacob Leaves the Presence of the Most Powerful Man in the World Having Given Him, Twice, the Covenant Blessing. Jacob enters blessing Pharaoh. He leaves blessing Pharaoh. The double blessing frames the entire encounter: Jacob's role in this meeting is not the supplicant asking for favor but the covenant bearer distributing the blessing that flows from Abraham through every generation to every nation. The most powerful man in the world has received the blessing of the covenant patriarch twice. The Abrahamic promise is being fulfilled in the palace of Egypt.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US TODAY

- 1. Bless the Powerful — The Covenant Community's First Act Toward the Authorities That Govern Them Is Blessing, Not Petition or Grievance:** Jacob's first act before Pharaoh is blessing. Not a request. Not a presentation of needs. Not a complaint about the situation. Blessing. The covenant community's first posture toward the governing authorities — even the most powerful authorities in the world — is the posture of blessing. This does not mean uncritical deference to every governmental decision. It means that the covenant person brings the blessing of the covenant to every encounter with the powerful, because the covenant promise is for all nations and all rulers, and the covenant person is the instrument through whom that blessing flows.
- 2. Call Your Years What They Are — Few and Difficult Is an Honest Description, Not a Failure of Faith:** Jacob says his years have been few and difficult. He does not dress up the difficulty with spiritual language or minimize the brevity with gratitude performance. He tells the truth about his own life to one of the most powerful men in the world. The permission to name the difficulty of the covenant life honestly — without despair, without bitterness, but also without false cheerfulness — is one of the most pastorally significant gifts of Jacob's answer to Pharaoh's question. Your years may have been few and difficult. That is an honest description. It is also a description that the God who has been with you through every difficult year can hear.
- 3. Understand Your Life as One Chapter in a Longer Covenant Story That Extends Before and After You:** Jacob places his years within the pilgrimage of his fathers. He is not the whole story. He is one chapter. The person who understands their own life as one chapter in a longer divine narrative is freed from the pressure to be the climax of their own story and

freed into the grace of being a faithful chapter in a story that God is telling across many generations. Your years are fewer than Abraham's and Isaac's. Your chapter will end. The story continues. Be a faithful chapter.

### HOW THIS RELATES TO TODAY

Jacob's description of his years as years of pilgrimage connects directly to the New Testament's description of the Christian life. Hebrews 11:13-16 describes all the patriarchs — Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — as people who admitted that they were foreigners and strangers on earth, who were looking for a country of their own, who were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. The pilgrim language of Jacob's answer to Pharaoh is the language that the entire Hebrews 11 Hall of Faith uses to describe the covenant life: a life on the way to a destination not yet reached, a life that is defined by the promise rather than by current possession. The Christian who understands their life as a pilgrimage is the Christian who lives with the orientation of Jacob: I am a stranger here, I am on my way to where I am going, and my years have been few and difficult but accompanied by the God of my fathers.

The settlement of the covenant family in the best part of the land — the district of Rameses — is also the settlement in the area that will become the center of the Hebrew community in Egypt for the next four centuries. The same district that Joseph provides for the family in chapter 47 will be the district from which the Hebrews will eventually be enslaved and from which they will eventually depart in the Exodus. The providential geography of the settlement positions the covenant family exactly where they will need to be for the next chapter of the covenant story, even though that chapter is four hundred years away.

**Key Lesson:** The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty — few and difficult — Jacob's honest assessment to the most powerful king in the world names the texture of the covenant life as pilgrimage, difficulty, and brevity, while placing that life within the larger narrative of the patriarchal pilgrimage; the covenant person brings blessing to the powerful, names their years honestly, and understands their life as one chapter in a longer story that God is telling across many generations.

### Genesis 47:13–26 — The Famine's Climax: Joseph's Administration and the Transfer of Egypt

*(13) There was no food, however, in the whole region because the famine was severe; both Egypt and Canaan wasted away because of the famine. (14) Joseph collected all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan in payment for the grain they were buying, and he brought it to Pharaoh's palace. (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 used up.' (16) 'Then bring your livestock,' said Joseph. 'I will sell you food in exchange for your livestock, since your money is gone.' (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. (18) When that year was over, they came to him the following year and said, 'We cannot hide from our lord 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. (19) 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 we can live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate.' (20) So Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sold their fields, because the famine was too severe for them. The land became Pharaoh's, (21) and Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other. (22) 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 fields. (24) 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.' (25) 'You have saved our lives,' they said. 'May we find favor in the eyes of our lord; we will be in bondage to Pharaoh.' (26) So Joseph established it as a law concerning land in Egypt—still in force today—that a fifth of the produce belongs to Pharaoh. It was only the land of the priests that did not become Pharaoh's.*

### **The Context:**

The famine administration passage in chapter 47 is one of the most morally complex in the Joseph narrative, and any reading that avoids the complexity is not reading it carefully. The sequence is stark: the Egyptians buy grain with money until the money runs out, then with livestock until the livestock is gone, then with their land and themselves until all private property and personal freedom in Egypt belongs to Pharaoh. The covenant person — the man through whom all nations were supposed to be blessed — has administered a system that results in the complete subjugation of an entire nation's population to Pharaoh's authority.

There are multiple ways to read the administration described in these verses. On one reading, Joseph is the hero who saves the lives of an entire population through a remarkably effective food distribution system in an impossible crisis. The Egyptians themselves say you have saved our lives. They come to Joseph. They make the offers voluntarily. No one is forced. The alternative to the transaction is death from famine. And Joseph establishes a system — twenty percent of the harvest to Pharaoh, eighty percent kept by the people — that is arguably more equitable than the pre-famine system in which Pharaoh owned nothing and the people owned everything.

On another reading, the administration is the biblical account of the origins of ancient Near Eastern debt bondage — the process by which crisis conditions were exploited by powerful central authorities to concentrate land and labor into a system of permanent subjugation. The people ask to be bought. They ask to become Pharaoh's servants. They say they will be in bondage to Pharaoh. The vocabulary is the vocabulary of enslavement, even if the transaction is voluntary. And the reader who knows what is coming in Exodus — the Israelites reduced to forced labor in Egypt — cannot read this passage without the awareness that the system Joseph establishes will eventually be the system within which the covenant people will be enslaved.

The text itself does not resolve the moral complexity with a clear editorial verdict. It reports. The Egyptians said you have saved our lives. Joseph established it as a law. Joseph exempted the priests. The covenant people — the family in Goshen — are not mentioned in this section at all. They were provisioned separately by Joseph. They are not part of the purchase. The nation whose people are being transferred to Pharaoh's ownership is not the covenant nation. But the covenant person is the instrument of the transfer.

### **Plain American English:**

"There was no food anywhere in the region — the famine was crushing, devastating both Egypt and Canaan. Joseph collected all the money from Egypt and Canaan as payment for the grain people were buying and brought it all to Pharaoh's treasury. When the money in Egypt and Canaan ran out, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said: 'Give us food. Why should we die in front of you? We have no money left.' Joseph said: 'If your money is gone, bring me your livestock. I will give you grain in exchange for your animals.' They brought their horses, sheep, goats, cattle, and donkeys, and Joseph gave them grain in exchange. He got them through that year by accepting all their livestock. When the next year came, they came back and said: 'We are not going to pretend that our money is gone and so are our animals. We have nothing left to offer except ourselves and our land. Why should we die — us and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We will become Pharaoh's servants, and give us seed so we can survive and not die and so the land does not go to waste.' So Joseph acquired all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. Every Egyptian sold their fields because the famine was too severe. All the land became Pharaoh's, and Joseph put the

people into service for Pharaoh from one end of Egypt to the other. Then Joseph said to the people: 'Since I have now bought you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you to plant your fields. When the harvest comes, twenty percent belongs to Pharaoh. You keep eighty percent for planting and for your families.' The people said: 'You have saved our lives. Let us find favor with you, our lord, and we will be Pharaoh's servants.' So Joseph made it a standing law in Egypt that twenty percent of the harvest goes to Pharaoh — and it has been the law to this day. Only the land of the priests was not bought by Pharaoh."

## KEY OBSERVATIONS

**"There was no food, however, in the whole region because the famine was severe; both Egypt and Canaan wasted away":** This signifies The Scale of the Crisis as the Context Within Which Joseph's Administration Must Be Evaluated — This Is Not a Peacetime Policy Decision but a Survival Crisis Management System. The famine that Joseph is administering is catastrophic and comprehensive: both Egypt and Canaan are wasting away. The grain system that Joseph administers is not operating in normal economic conditions. It is operating in a survival crisis where the alternative to the transactions being described is death. The moral evaluation of Joseph's administration must be conducted in the context of the scale of the crisis it is managing.

**"Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh":** This signifies The Voluntary Nature of the Transaction as One Dimension of Its Moral Complexity — the People Are Asking to Be Bought, Not Being Forced. The Egyptians make the offer. They come to Joseph. They propose the exchange. This is not Joseph seizing their land and person. They are asking to be bought — voluntarily, in the face of the alternative of death. The voluntary character of the transaction is one morally relevant dimension. The complete concentration of power in Pharaoh's hands that results from the transactions, however voluntary, is another. Both dimensions are present in the text simultaneously.

**"You have saved our lives. May we find favor in the eyes of our lord; we will be in bondage to Pharaoh":** This signifies The Egyptian People's Own Verdict on Joseph's Administration as Salvation — a Verdict That Does Not Resolve the Moral Complexity but Must Be Reckoned With. The people who have exchanged their land and freedom for food say: you have saved our lives. Their assessment of the transaction is that the survival enabled by the system outweighs the bondage the system produces. This verdict does not resolve the question of whether the system was just by some external moral standard. But it is the verdict of the people who were in the crisis, and it is the biblical text's own record of how the affected population evaluated the outcome.

**"It was only the land of the priests that did not become Pharaoh's":** This signifies Joseph's Exemption of the Priestly Class as a Detail That Reveals the Limits of the Consolidation and the Social Structure That the System Preserved. Joseph does not purchase the land of the priests. The priestly class — who received their food allocation from Pharaoh and did not need to sell their land for food — retain their independent economic standing. The exemption of the priests from the consolidation is both a practical accommodation of Egypt's religious structure and a limit on the totality of the consolidation: not everything in Egypt becomes Pharaoh's. The priests retain their independence.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US TODAY

- 1. Crisis Conditions Produce Moral Complexity That Peacetime Analysis Cannot Fully Resolve — Evaluate With the Context, Not Merely Against an External Standard:** Joseph's famine administration is morally complex in ways that cannot be resolved by simple application of peacetime economic principles. The people were dying. The alternative to the transactions was death. Joseph saved lives through a system that also concentrated power in Pharaoh's hands. The person who evaluates crisis-condition decisions

by peacetime moral standards alone may miss the complexity that genuine crises produce. This does not mean anything goes in a crisis. It means that moral evaluation of crisis management must be conducted in full awareness of what the crisis actually was.

- 2. The Covenant Person Is Not Insulated From Moral Complexity by Virtue of Their Covenant Status:** Joseph is the covenant person, the son of Jacob, the one through whom God was accomplishing the saving purpose of Genesis 45:5. And Joseph administers a system that results in the complete subjugation of an entire population to Pharaoh's authority. The covenant status does not guarantee the moral clarity of every decision the covenant person makes in a complex crisis. The theological trajectory of the whole story does not prevent the individual decisions within the story from being morally complex. The covenant person can be the instrument of God's saving purpose and the administrator of a morally problematic system simultaneously.
- 3. The Systems We Build in Crisis Tend to Outlast the Crisis and Become the Structures Within Which Future Generations Live:** Joseph established it as a law concerning land in Egypt — still in force today. The system Joseph builds during the famine becomes the permanent land tenure system of Egypt. Systems built to manage crises rarely dismantle themselves when the crisis ends. They become institutionalized, normalized, and eventually taken for granted. The person who is building systems in a crisis should consider not only what the system accomplishes in the crisis but what it will institutionalize for the generations that come after it.

#### HOW THIS RELATES TO TODAY

The famine administration passage in Genesis 47 has generated significant scholarly discussion about its historical background. The specific details — the transfer of land, the twenty percent taxation system, the exemption of the priests — correspond to what is known about land tenure and taxation in ancient Egypt from extra-biblical sources. The passage has the character of historical reporting about an actual administrative system, not the character of legendary narrative. The historical specificity is one of the features that distinguishes the Joseph narrative as a whole from the more legendary character of some ancient Near Eastern parallels.

The implicit contrast between the Egyptians who are being bought and the covenant family in Goshen who are being provisioned freely by Joseph is one of the most theologically significant details in the passage. The chapter does not highlight this contrast explicitly. It simply moves from the account of the Egyptian famine administration to the account of Jacob's request for burial. But the reader who is aware of what will happen in Exodus can see the setup: the Egyptians are now Pharaoh's servants, the system is in place, and the covenant family is living in Goshen. Four centuries from now, Pharaoh will extend the logic of Egyptian bondage to include the Israelites in Goshen. The conditions for the Exodus are being established in the famine administration of chapter 47.

**Key Lesson:** Joseph established it as a law concerning land in Egypt — still in force today — that twenty percent of the harvest belongs to Pharaoh; the systems built in crisis become the structures of future generations, and the covenant person who administers a survival crisis with remarkable effectiveness may simultaneously be building the institutional conditions within which future suffering will occur; moral complexity does not dissolve in the light of good intentions or covenant calling.

#### Genesis 47:27–31 — Jacob's Request: Bury Me With My Fathers in Canaan

*(27) Now the Israelites settled in Egypt in the region of Goshen. They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number. (28) Jacob lived in Egypt seventeen years, and the years of his life were a hundred and forty-seven. (29) When the*

*time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, 'If I have found favor in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt, (30) but when I rest with my ancestors, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.' 'I will do as you say,' he said. (31) 'Swear to me,' he said. Then Joseph swore to him, and Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.*

### **The Context:**

The Israelites acquired property, were fruitful, and increased greatly in number. In seventeen years in Egypt, the covenant family has already begun the multiplication that the covenant promised. They are fruitful. They are increasing. The seventy souls of chapter 46 are becoming the community that will eventually be as numerous as the stars. The fruitfulness is not despite being in Egypt — it is in Egypt, exactly as God promised at Beersheba: I will make you into a great nation there.

Jacob's request to Joseph is made with the solemnity of an ancient covenant gesture: put your hand under my thigh and promise. This is the same gesture Abraham used when he sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac in chapter 24 — the most solemn form of personal oath available in the patriarchal culture. Jacob is not asking Joseph to make a casual promise. He is asking for the most binding personal covenant available. The content of the request is specific: do not bury me in Egypt. When I rest with my ancestors, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried. The cave of Machpelah in Hebron, where Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah are buried, is where Jacob wants to be.

The request reflects Jacob's covenant orientation even in old age and even in the comfort of Goshen. He has been in Egypt for seventeen years. Pharaoh has given him the best land. Joseph has provided everything his family needs. The situation is comfortable, even prosperous. And Jacob's deepest belonging is not to Goshen or to Egypt. His body belongs in the land of the promise — in the cave that Abraham purchased as the first permanent covenant holding in Canaan. The burial request is a declaration of covenant identity: wherever I have lived, I belong to the land of the promise. Bury me there.

Joseph swears. And the chapter ends with one of the most moving images in Genesis: Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. The staff is the staff of the pilgrim — the walking stick of the man who has been traveling his whole life. And Jacob worships leaning on it. The pilgrim who has finally found what he was looking for — his son alive, his family safe, his years drawing to a close — worships. The posture is reverence and gratitude and physical frailty all at once: leaning on the staff, facing the end, worshipping the God who has been with him through every mile of the pilgrimage.

### **Plain American English:**

"The Israelites settled in Egypt in the region of Goshen. They acquired property there and were fruitful and grew rapidly in number. Jacob lived in Egypt for seventeen years, making the total length of his life one hundred and forty-seven years. As the time of Israel's death drew near, he called for his son Joseph and said: 'If I mean anything to you, make me a solemn promise — I need your kindness and your faithfulness here. Do not bury me in Egypt. When I die and am gathered to my ancestors, take me out of Egypt and bury me alongside them.' Joseph said: 'I will do what you have asked.' Jacob said: 'Swear it to me.' Joseph swore it. And Israel bowed in worship, leaning over the top of his staff."

### **KEY OBSERVATIONS**

#### **"They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number":**

This signifies The Fulfillment of the Covenant Promise of Fruitfulness Beginning in Egypt — God Is Making Them into a Great Nation There, Exactly as He Promised at Beersheba. The multiplication of the covenant family begins in Egypt. The seventy souls of chapter 46 have been in Egypt for seventeen years and are already acquiring property and increasing greatly.

The God who told Jacob at Beersheba do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there is making good on the promise. The Egypt that looked like it might be the end of the covenant story is the incubator of the covenant nation.

**"Put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness":** This signifies The Most Solemn Personal Oath Available in the Patriarchal Culture — Jacob Is Asking Joseph for the Same Level of Covenant Commitment That Abraham Asked of His Servant. The thigh gesture is the same gesture Abraham used with his servant in Genesis 24 — the oath sworn on the life-giving capacity of the patriarch, the most binding personal covenant available. Jacob is not asking for a verbal commitment. He is asking for the covenant oath. The request reveals both the depth of Jacob's desire to be buried in Canaan and the depth of his trust in Joseph: he is asking Joseph to make the most solemn promise available about the most personal request of his final days.

**"Do not bury me in Egypt. Carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried":** This signifies The Covenant Orientation of the Dying Patriarch — His Body Belongs in the Land of the Promise Even When His Final Years Are Lived in Egypt. Jacob has been comfortable in Egypt for seventeen years. His family has prospered. Joseph has provided everything. And his deepest belonging is not to Egypt but to Canaan — to the cave of Machpelah, to the land that was promised to Abraham and confirmed to Isaac and confirmed again to Jacob. The burial request is a declaration that the covenant geography claims the covenant person even in death. Wherever you live, you belong to the promise. Bury me with my fathers.

**"Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff":** This signifies The Final Image of the Chapter as the Portrait of the Aging Pilgrim — Physical Frailty, Covenant Faithfulness, and Worship at the End of the Road. Jacob worships leaning on his staff. The staff is the pilgrim's implement — the walking stick of the man who has been traveling his whole life. At the end of the pilgrimage, with the covenant oath from his son sworn and the request about burial secured, Jacob worships. The posture — leaning, frail, facing the end — combined with the act — worship — is the portrait of the covenant person who has arrived at the end of the road and still knows who to face. He faces God. He worships.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US TODAY

- 1. The Covenant Promise of Fruitfulness Is Being Fulfilled in the Egypt You Are Living In — Look for the Multiplication in the Unexpected Place:** The Israelites are fruitful and increasing in Egypt, not in Canaan. The multiplication that the covenant promised is happening in the place the covenant people did not expect to be and did not choose. The person who is looking for the fulfillment of the covenant promise only in the familiar and expected geography may miss the multiplication that is happening in the Egypt they are currently living in. Be fruitful where you are. God makes great nations in Egypts.
- 2. Ask for the Most Solemn Commitment When the Request Is the Most Personal and the Most Important:** Jacob asks Joseph for the thigh-oath — the most binding covenant gesture available — for the request about his burial. He does not ask for a casual agreement about an important matter. He matches the solemnity of the commitment to the importance of the request. Some requests are important enough to require the most serious form of commitment available. Ask for it when the thing you are asking for is the thing that most reflects your deepest covenant identity and your most personal desires at the end of your life.
- 3. Worship Leaning on the Staff — The End of the Pilgrimage Is the Occasion for Worship, Not Complaint:** Jacob worships. He is old. He is leaning on his staff. His years have been few and difficult. He is about to die in Egypt rather than in the Promised Land he was given. And he worships. The final image of the chapter is not Jacob rehearsing his

grievances or cataloguing the losses or expressing regret about the journey. He worships. The person who has lived the covenant life faithfully through all its difficulty and arrived at the end of the road can do the same: lean on the staff, face the God who has been there through every mile, and worship.

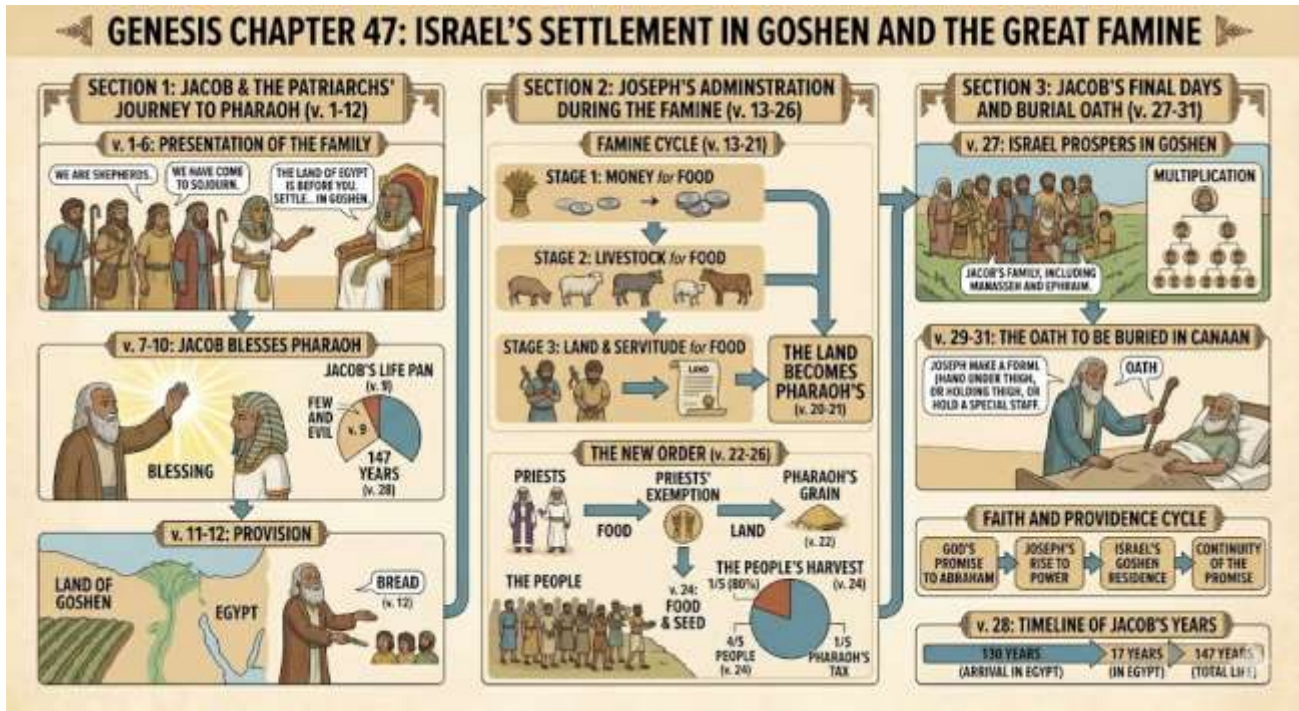
### **HOW THIS RELATES TO TODAY**

Jacob's burial request in verses 29 and 30 will be honored in Genesis 50, when Joseph leads a massive funeral procession from Egypt to Canaan and buries Jacob in the cave of Machpelah. The fulfillment of the oath Joseph swears in chapter 47 is one of the most detailed covenant oath-keeping episodes in Genesis — the entire machinery of Egyptian imperial burial preparation is deployed to honor the personal oath that Joseph swore to his dying father. The covenant promise keeps its oath with a scope and thoroughness that exceeds what Jacob could have imagined when he asked.

The image of Israel worshiping as he leaned on the top of his staff appears in Hebrews 11:21 as one of the examples of patriarchal faith in the Hall of Faith: By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. The image from the end of Genesis 47 is placed in the New Testament's list of the greatest demonstrations of faith in the Old Testament. The dying patriarch worshiping on his staff is what Hebrews 11 identifies as the expression of faith: not the dramatic encounters or the covenant ceremonies, but the worship of the old man leaning on his staff at the end of the road. This is what faith looks like when it has been lived long enough.

**Key Lesson:** Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff — the final image of the chapter is the portrait of the aging pilgrim who has secured the covenant oath for his burial, whose family is fruitful and increasing in Egypt exactly as God promised, who has lived his years honestly as few and difficult, and who at the end of the road does the most faithful thing available to him: leans on the staff and worships the God who has been there through every mile of the pilgrimage.

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## Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

As we close Genesis chapter 47, we have seen Jacob bless the most powerful man in the world, name his years as few and difficult, watch the famine system transform Egypt, and ask his son for the most solemn oath available about where his body will rest. And we have seen the final image of the chapter: Israel worshipping as he leaned on the top of his staff. Lord, let that image be with us. The pilgrim's staff. The worshipping posture. The old man who has arrived at the end of the road and still knows who to face.

Father, thank You for the permission Jacob gives us to name our years honestly. Few and difficult. Not romanticized. Not despairing. Honest. The covenant life is accompanied but not insulated from difficulty. The pilgrim has a staff because the road is long and the terrain is hard. Let us name our own few and difficult years honestly — to You, to the people around us, even to the powerful people who ask about our lives — without pretending the difficulty was not real.

Lord, the family is fruitful and increasing in Egypt. The multiplication is happening in the unexpected place, in the Egypt they entered because the famine pressed them, under the provision of the son they believed was dead. You make great nations in Egypts. Whatever Egypt we are currently living in — let us look for the multiplication that is happening there, in the unexpected place, under the provision that Your providence has arranged.

And Lord, the burial request is the covenant declaration of Jacob's deepest identity: wherever I live, I belong to the promise. Give us that orientation. The sense that wherever we are currently living, our deepest belonging is to the covenant community and the covenant geography of the kingdom that is coming. We are pilgrims. We are on the way. And we will be brought back. You promised.

In Jesus' name — who is preparing the place to which we are heading, who holds the end of the pilgrimage in His hands — we pray,

*Amen.*

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