

FOUNDING FATHERS 5: A STUDY IN THE BOOK GENESIS
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Before we get into this week's sermon, just a quick follow up on last week's sermon on sex. Did you know that the congregation of SFC had the cleanest houses in the entire Bay Area last week? If you don't get that joke, then you need to listen to last week's sermon. Last week's topic was kind of controversial, so I'd like to lead with something less polarizing this week. Something that we can all gather around and agree on. Something that isn't divisive or nuanced, just straightforward. This week I'd like to talk about national debt.

A few weeks ago, we talked about the acts of residency and assumption. Basically Alexander Hamilton made a trade with James Madison that moved the capital from New York City to the Potomac in exchange for the states collectively assuming the national debt. Another part of that plan was allowing the states to take out loans including the process of bonds and furthering national debt. The practice of the United States going into debt began with a huge loan, astronomical even. Are you ready to hear about how enormous our national debt began? \$19,608. 81. Okay, that's not huge. Adjusted for inflation, that amount is likely only to be about \$300,000. Nonetheless, the concept was huge. The amount was large for the day and it was controversial.

People argued about mixing the government with the banks. People argued about the ethics of it. People argued if it would work, but it did. The United States thrived financially, and the issued bonds became valuable and traded better than European debt bonds. America thrived with credit as the economy grew and people began to invest in this country. Fast-forward a couple hundred years. That debt is now 14 trillion dollars. To put that into perspective, the United States pays about \$19,608.00 in interest every two seconds on the debt we owe today. For some, this is a huge albatross around our necks that is kicking the financial can down the road and handcuffing future generations. The debt plan looked good, but it ended up enslaving the very people it was meant to set free. For others it is not an excessive amount compared to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and it

allows us to leverage our resources and invest in this country. While it does limit some options, it actually sets us free to bet on ourselves and leverage our future. It really depends upon how you look at it. It's a matter of perspective. Let's take a vote real quick, okay...never mind. This wasn't as unifying a topic as I thought it would be.

Turns out, there is nothing new under the sun. In a very similar position, Joseph concocted a very similar plan. When you take a closer look, Joseph, son of Jacob, and Alexander Hamilton are quite similar. They both had difficult upbringings. Hamilton, orphaned, cast out on his own at age 14 was forced to grow up too early. With no pedigree, he quickly rose into a premiere position and was hugely influential in the economics of a powerful country. He was also a bit cocky, arrogant and self-assured. Likewise, Joseph had a difficult youth as he was betrayed by his brothers, thrown into a well and sold into slavery. He rose to position of influence only to be wrongfully accused and imprisoned. Finally with no pedigree, he rises to prominence in a premiere position with power over the economics of a powerful country. Some might say he too was a bit arrogant, self-assured and cocky. That's why we used the song *My Shot* today. It's a nice snapshot of a rising star that might be a little too big for his britches, a man who is cocky with good reason because he has skills and abilities that no one else does. Joseph also delivered a debt plan that many hailed as wise and salvific. Others said it was ethically wrong and led to the enslavement of his own people.

The sermon today isn't about national debt. I mean it is, but it's about so much more than that. The sermon today is about making the right decisions in complicated situations. We are in the final weeks of our series *Founding Fathers*. We are looking at the complicated stories of the Founding Fathers of our faith and our country. When we are young, the stories about our Founding Fathers are clean and clear cut. The heroes are good guys with unquestioned integrity and valor. The bad guys are clearly evil and wrong-headed. With the benefit of hindsight, we tend to sand off the rough corners of history and sanitize and spiritualize the actions of our Founding Fathers. When you look a bit closer, it's more complicated than that. As you grow up and learn more, you learn they were heroic but also messy. Their lives were beautiful but also broken. That leaves you with the unenviable task

of being an adult dealing with nuanced and complicated matters, of clearing a path through shades of grey that you used to think was black and white.

In today's sermon, we will look at Joseph's debt plan which could be hailed as a success or a disaster depending on how you look at it. That will leave us with some principles on how we deal with the messier issues of life. What do you do with complicated social and spiritual issues? The Bible seems to speak clearly to some topics propositionally, but by example, almost no one lives them out. Or the Bible says one thing in one place and seemingly something contradictory in another. Or the Bible doesn't speak to a topic at all. That is why we have thousands of Christian denominations today. That's why we have people in the same denomination who think and vote differently. Life is complicated. It's all in how you look at it. It's all about perspective. So how do we handle the big complicated issues?

Genesis 47:13

As a bit of background, we are picking up after a lot has transpired for Joseph. He was thrown into a well, sold into slavery, worked in Potiphar's household, thrown in jail on the accusation of trying to sleep with Potiphar's wife, left to languish in jail after a friend promises to get him out. Finally he gets out, mainly because he could decipher Pharaoh's dreams. Pharaoh had a dream about seven fat cows and then seven skinny cows and the seven fat cows then being eaten by the skinny cows. Joseph deciphered this mystery as seven years of plentiful harvest followed by seven years of extreme famine.

Joseph then delivered to Pharaoh a plan of action. For seven years, people are to pay a 20% tax on their grains to be stored up by the country. Then when the famine strikes, those reserves can be used to feed the people. This plan was pleasing to Pharaoh, so that is exactly what they did. They taxed the people and collected 20% of their harvest each of the seven years. The famine came and Egypt became the supplier of grain not only for Egypt, but for the surrounding countries. Included in this are the sons of Israel, numbering about 70. Jacob and all of his offspring are welcomed into Egypt to work the land. There is the

whole story about Joseph reuniting with his father and brothers, forgiving his brothers for their sins of selling him into slavery and causing him a great deal of pain. We find that reunion here.

Genesis 45 4-11

Not only does Joseph forgive his brothers. He sees God's divine plan. He tells them God sent him ahead to help save the nation and to save them. It's all about how you see it. It's all about perspective. Joseph saw God even in the midst of the slavery and his jail time. For just this moment, God set these things in motion. You just have to have the eyes to see it. Here's where it gets a bit murky.

Genesis 47:14-17

Let's be clear on what is going on here. The government has taxed people 20% of their grain for seven years. Now during seven years of famine, their own grain is sold back to them. It says, Joseph collected all of their money and brought it into Pharaoh's house. The people were still hungry and they asked to buy more of their grain back from the government, but they had no money. So Joseph proposes they give their livestock to buy back their grain, and they do. But it doesn't end there.

Genesis 47:18-21

The people of the land run out of food again, so Joseph buys all of their land in exchange for food. Which was their food that Pharaoh taxed from them and is now selling back to them. In the course of 14 years, you see the biggest consolidation of wealth in human history. As they say in political circles, never let a good crisis go to waste.

Now, there is something to offend you here no matter your political affiliation. For some of you this looks like the 1% getting richer while everyone else gets poorer. To others of you this looks like big government taxing people and then selling them back what is rightfully

theirs. It's all in how you look at it. It's really a matter of perspective. However you frame it, I think we can agree this is problematic. Whether it's economic larceny or governmental overreach, it becomes clear that an entire nation has become hungrier and poorer while the ruler of the land has become infinitely rich. Let's finish the last part.

Genesis 47:22-26

The story ends with two final thoughts. The people of the land are now indentured servants who pay a continual 20% tax to use their own land. The land that used to be theirs with livestock that used to be theirs to buy back food that used to be theirs until it was collected by Pharaoh and sold back to them. So they lost their money, land, livestock and freedom, and in exchange they now can work their land and pay Pharaoh a 20% tax in perpetuity.

The strange thing is they say, "You have saved our lives." Which is true. Without the foresight and storage of grain, they might have all been dead. In one sense, you can say they lost everything, but without the grain taxation and selling their land, cattle and themselves to Pharaoh, they might have ended up dead. I guess it's all a matter of perspective; it's all in how you look at it. Those things are equally true. He did take all of their stuff and he did save their lives, but they do end up essentially as slaves to the state. That gets really important in the near future.

I loved reading the *Far Side* comics growing up. Do you remember all of those great cartoons from Gary Larsen? In one frame he could show something absurd that usually offered a little commentary on the way of the world and the human condition. This passage made me think of this great little cartoon.

<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/10/aa/be/10aabe5f5461b5931715d45fd14870d7.jpg>

It's only slightly funny with some hindsight, and it's actually pretty dark. These native Americans have only begun to realize that these intrepid explorers would bring with them

violence, disease, money-hungry, power-hungry people that will take their land, take their wealth and marginalize them to what one day will be called “reservations.” I’ve heard people complain about Indian casinos. A 2011 survey found that Native Americans operated over 400 casinos on native lands across 28 states and took in over 26 billion dollars and paid no federal income tax. With little to no irony in their voices, they complain that these people are getting rich and taking our money and not paying taxes, and getting away with it. I guess it’s all in how you look at it. It’s a matter of perspective.

Here’s what I don’t want you to miss today. With Joseph’s help, Egypt created an economy that was built upon indentured labor and slavery. For Joseph and his family, this was extremely beneficial mainly because they were favored by Pharaoh and received the benefits of being at the top of this system. I think you know where this story goes. The book of Genesis ends and the book of Exodus begins, and that’s where we find these ironic words.

Exodus 1:8-14

The system Joseph created for freedom eventually led to their slavery. If there had not been a system that was okay with the subjugation of many to the few, then enslavement might have never happened. If there had not been a system that was okay with collecting from the poor to pay the rich, this might never have happened. A great line from William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun* is applicable here, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Simply put, whether we know it or not, our actions always have consequences. What we do individually and corporately continues to echo and ripple for generations. What looks like freedom today could be slavery tomorrow.

Here is the bottom line today. Joseph lived and made decisions in a time before the handing down of the Ten Commandments. The God/Israel story was just beginning. Yahweh’s people were only just beginning to know and understand his nature and values. He wasn’t aware of the teachings in Deuteronomy that called for charity to the poor, hungry and downcast. He wasn’t aware that God gave manna in the desert without a requirement of

compensation. He didn't know about a carpenter from Nazareth that said to give freely and love generously. He saw a complicated situation and tried to make a wise decision.

It's always easy to look back at previous generations and judge how they did what they did. With the information they had, they made the best decisions possible. You need to look no further than parenting to see something that is applicable to many of us. Some of you grew up in a time where children were laid on their stomachs to sleep and now everyone says you should only put them on their backs. Some of you grew up in a time where kids rode not only without car seats, but many times without seatbelts. Some of you grew up in a time where parents smoked around their children without any concerns. This list could go on and on, and these are decisions that are only a generation old. Does anyone think these decisions were made with malice or ill will? No, of course not. I can guarantee that some of us with young children in this room will look back 40 years from now and say, "I can't believe we did it that way."

If we go back a few generations, you will see practices and ideas that seem barbaric and obscene. We only get to say that with the benefit of hindsight. We are facing a slew of complicated matters on the horizon as a culture and as a Christian community. We have some options. We can look back at the past and idealize and normalize their actions, or we can say not only are individuals sanctified by God over time, but communities and countries are also sanctified over time. God allows us to grow and learn from our mistakes and hopefully the arc of the universe does bend toward justice and righteousness.

My hope for us today is to see how complicated it all is. Returning to our original conundrum, what do we do with complicated questions? What do we do with the messiness of life and how to live it? The simple and yet profound answer is humility and graciousness. It would be easier to speak definitively and with authority and give you a divine principle to apply with rigidity to every area of your life, but aside from a few issues, life isn't really like that. So humility comes in realizing that a generation ago we made huge mistakes, and we did it without an ounce of malice. Today we could be doing the very same thing, so humility invites us to consider the perspective of others. That people who want

guns in their houses aren't gun nuts, and people who want stricter gun control aren't brainless liberals who want us all to be victims. That people who vote conservative aren't heartless, and people who vote liberal aren't brainless. That people who affirm LGBT haven't abandon scripture, and people who oppose gay marriage aren't bigots. Humility calls us to consider people on the other side of the aisle and the other side of the pew.

Humility and then graciousness with the benefit of the Old and New Testament and the guidance of the Holy Spirit is required when it comes to big complicated issues to insure we land on the most gracious response. With the benefit of hindsight, we can look at Genesis 47 and say that while that was beneficial for Pharaoh and Joseph's families, it wasn't gracious for the greater community. We do that because we know that if we live in ways that benefit our bias, it can one day backfire on us. That's why our church encourages engagement with the Muslim community. That's why I encourage the freedom of religion for Muslims. We can limit their travel and freedom of expression to benefit ourselves now, but what happens a generation from now when those same strictures are placed on Christians?

Alexander Hamilton had a lot of great ideas, but he also had some bad ones. Hamilton wrote the majority of the Federalist Papers in which he advocated for a certain style of democratic government. One of Hamilton's proposed ideas that did not come to fruition was that the elected executive hold the office for life. This sounds a lot like a king to me, and it did to a lot of people who heard it then too. Now, why do you think Hamilton might have been in favor of such a notion? Maybe because the clear favorite for President was a man named George Washington, a man he knew, respected and was close to. If he knew men like Madison and Jefferson would one day hold that position, I doubt he would have held that same idea.

Humility and grace. We are facing a world with a lot of complicated cultural and theological questions. We need to take strong thoughtful stances on these issues, and we do that today in the shadow of the cross. You can see that a couple of different ways. For some at the time, the cross looked like humiliation and defeat. Seemingly on that cross hung a failed

Messiah, a man who lost to the religious officials and the Roman government. A broken and bloodied man who was asking why God forsook him in his final moments.

For others, the cross looked like victory, a messiah who was obedient to death even death on a cross. The Son of God who loved people so much he refused to fight back or return evil for evil. A carpenter who was so loving, he could absorb all of our hate and still say, "Father forgive them." I guess it's a matter of perspective. It all depends on how you see it.