

34. The seared conscience awaken by guilt

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In the latter part of Genesis 41 we were told that the severe famine which struck Egypt also spread over all the known world. Now, beginning in Genesis 42, our focus suddenly shifts from the well-stocked granaries of Egypt to the empty cupboards of Canaan, from Joseph to Joseph's father and eleven brothers.

Approximately twenty two years has been past and Joseph's brothers had become middle-aged men, with families of their own. They probably never mentioned that horrible deed of violence to each other. They did their best to banish the thought from their minds.

Sometimes in their dreams they may have caught a glimpse of horrified Joseph's face in its agony, or heard the pleading voice of his anguished soul from the bottom of the pit where they threw him in. They also could not easily erase the look on his face as he was taken away by the Ishmaelite slave traders. After all, the twenty pieces of silver didn't seem like a good amount of money for them to sell their conscience and brother.

But they sought to drown such painful memories in any possible ways. Eventually, their conscience slept. Until now. Joseph's brothers are about to meet the governor whom God will use to awaken their slumbering consciences and reunite a divided house.

A. SETTING UP A STAGE IN EGYPT

Genesis 42:1-4 When Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, Jacob said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" 2 And he said, "Indeed I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down to that place and buy for us there, that we may live and not die." 3 So Joseph's ten brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. 4 But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "Lest some calamity befall him."

Joseph's brothers had lived with a terrible secret these 20 years. They never talked about it but it never left them. Any mention of Joseph or Egypt would bring up the guilt. They needed to be set free from the power of this terrible secret.

The impression we have of Jacob from this chapter is of a man who is bitter and pessimistic about everything. Because of this calamity, he believes another disaster is on the way.

Famine is a terrible thing, but God used it. God can and does use material need and lack in our life to get us to do things we normally would never do. Normally, the brothers would never go to Egypt. But need drove them to Egypt.

B. THE DREAMS COME TRUE

Genesis 42:5-6 And the sons of Israel went to buy grain among those who journeyed, for the famine was in the land of Canaan. 6 Now Joseph was governor over the land; and it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the earth.

Egypt has become the soup kitchen for a starving world. Each week thousands come to buy food from the wise prime minister who has shrewdly prepared for the seven year famine.

When Jacob's sons finally reach Egypt, they stand in line with their hat in their hands to buy grain with the rest of the gaunt-faced foreigners.

Twenty two years ago when Joseph's brothers plotted murder against him and sold him into slavery, they did it specifically attempting to defeat his dreams. Instead, by sending Joseph to Egypt, they provided the way the dreams would be fulfilled.

The great and glorious truth of God's providence is He can and does use the evil actions of man towards us to further His good plan. This never excuses man's evil, but it means God's wisdom and goodness are greater than man's evil.

Psalms 76:10 Surely your wrath against men brings you praise, and the survivors of your wrath are restrained. (NIV)

C. ENCOUNTER IN EGYPT

Genesis 42:7-9 Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them. Then he said to them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan to buy food." 8 So Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. 9 Then Joseph remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them, and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see the nakedness of the land!"

To help us gain a clearer picture of this scene, let's look at some of the reasons why it may have been difficult for the brothers to recognize Joseph.

1) Remember that more than twenty two years have passed.

The teenager brother Joseph they had known is a 39 to 40 years old man by now. His voice has matured, and he speaks a foreign language as if it were his native tongue. Also, Joseph they had known used to speak Hebrew, but this individual uses an interpreter to carry on their conversation.

2) Hebrews also wear beards, but Joseph's face is clean-shaven in the manner of the Egyptians.

Everything Joseph is wearing, from his headdress to his sandals, has an Egyptian designer label, not Jewish Wal-Mart brand. And even if the brothers do anticipate the remote possibility of seeing Joseph in Egypt, it's the faces of Hebrew slaves they'll be searching, not Egyptian rulers.

3) Joseph disguises his identity even further by speaking harshly to them.

Genesis 42:10-14 And they said to him, "No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. 11 We are all one man's sons; we are honest men; your servants are not spies." 12 But he said to them, "No, but you have come to see the nakedness of the land." 13 And they said, "Your servants are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and in fact, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more." 14 But Joseph said to them, "It is as I spoke to you, saying, 'You are spies!'

As Joseph watches, here are the ten of his brothers. They got right down on their faces before Joseph. I wonder how he felt. Here is the literal fulfillment of the dreams of Joseph when he was a teenager. Do you remember how he had dreamed as a boy that all the sheaves bowed down to his sheaf? Here it is taking place – all his older brothers are down on their faces before him.

"One is no more? But what if he is?" Joseph may be thinking. "What if he's alive and standing here in front of you? Will you rejoice and embrace him or remain and unchanged with your seared consciences?" So Joseph applies even more pressure.

Genesis 42:15-20 In this manner you shall be tested: By the life of Pharaoh, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. 16 Send one of you, and let him bring your brother; and you shall be kept in prison, that your words may be tested to see whether there is any truth in you; or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies!" 17 So he put them all together in prison three days. 18 Then Joseph said to them the third day, "Do this and live, for I fear God: 19 If you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined to your prison house; but you, go and carry grain for the famine of your houses. 20 And bring your youngest brother to me; so your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they did so.

When the test of severe trouble is applied, and when men are run out of any option to choose from, that is when the true character of the heart is revealed. And this is exactly the kind of test Joseph will apply to his brothers.

God can, and must, sometimes use ways we think are harsh to call us to where He wants us to be. We must never resent it, because it was the hardness of our hearts that demanded it.

Psalms 119:67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.

D. ADMITTING GUILT IS THE RIGHT START

Genesis 42:21-24 Then they said to one another, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us." 22 And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not speak to you, saying, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us." 23 But they did not know that Joseph understood them, for he spoke to them through an interpreter. 24 And he turned himself away from them and wept. Then he returned to them again, and talked with them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes.

During the three days in the Egyptian jailhouse, these ten brothers of Joseph had a lot of time to think about what they have done. God was awakening their seared conscience with admission of guilt.

To fully appreciate the intensity of this conversation, it's helpful know that the word 'we' used here in the Hebrew is extremely emphatic. "We are guilty"; "we saw the distress of his soul"; "we would not listen."

One of the first signs of a conscience awakening is the admission of personal guilt. Notice that the brothers don't blame their father for being passive. They don't blame Joseph for being proud in his midteen years. They simply confess their own guilt. That is a great start.

They feel that what is happening to them is the vengeance of God upon them for the way they treated Joseph.

There was not a completely logical connection between their current situation and their previous treatment of Joseph. But a guilty conscience sees every trouble as sin's penalty.

The United States government has something called the Federal Conscience Fund, which collects money people send in because they know they cheated the government in some way. People have sent in money because they took army blankets for souvenirs, or cheating on postage, or on income tax. But our consciences are notoriously weak or corrupt.

One man wrote the IRS and said, "I cheated on my taxes and can't sleep at night. Here is a check for \$100. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest."

Our conscience can be like a circus-trained poodle. Whistle once, it stands up. Whistle twice, it rolls over. Whistle a third time, and it plays dead. Our conscience cannot be trusted completely.

Joseph's forgiveness toward his brothers was done already. But he wanted to see if his brothers were changed to be reconciled. Forgiveness is "MUST" for all Christians, but reconciliation is depend on the situations.

To excuse people who are not sincerely repentant is to make them a worse sinner.
Luke 17:3-4 Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him.

E. NINE BROTHERS RETURN TO CANAAN

Genesis 42:25-28 Then Joseph gave a command to fill their sacks with grain, to restore every man's money to his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. Thus he did for them. 26 So they loaded their donkeys with the grain and departed from there. 27 But as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey feed at the encampment, he saw his money; and there it was, in the mouth of his sack. 28 So he said to his brothers, "My money has been restored, and there it is, in my sack!" Then their hearts failed them and they were afraid, saying to one another, "What is this that God has done to us?"
They feel that this is the judgment of God upon them. Ordinarily it would have been good news and a wonderful thing to have your money returned to you!

They were terrified because they were already suspected as spies. Now they can be accused as thieves also.

Genesis 42:29-38 Then they went to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan and told him all that had happened to them, saying: 30 "The man who is lord of the land spoke roughly to us, and took us for spies of the country. 31 But we said to him, 'We are honest men; we are not spies. 32 We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is with our father this day in the land of Canaan.' 33 Then the man, the lord of the country, said to us, 'By this I will know that you are honest men: Leave one of your brothers here with me, take food for the famine of your households, and be gone. 34 And bring your youngest brother to me; so I shall know that you are not spies, but that you are honest men. I will grant your brother to you, and you may trade in the land.'" 35 Then it happened as they emptied their sacks, that surprisingly each man's bundle of money was in his sack; and when they and their father saw the bundles of money, they were afraid. 36 And Jacob their father said to them, "You have bereaved me: Joseph is no

more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. All these things are against me." 37 Then Reuben spoke to his father, saying, "Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you." 38 But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is left alone. If any calamity should befall him along the way in which you go, then you would bring down my gray hair with sorrow to the grave."

Poor old Jacob! He's not the cocky individual we once knew, nor is he quite the man of faith that we shall see a little later. But he is growing. He is not bragging now but is very pessimistic. He makes Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh look like a cheerleader.

Jacob obviously lost his trust in the ability of God to do more than he can see or understand. There was a sobering contrast between Jacob and Joseph. Joseph had far worse circumstances, but he never took the attitude all these things are against him.

Remember that they have left Simeon down there in Egypt. Apparently, Jacob didn't think too much of Simeon. It didn't matter to him that Simeon spent the rest of his life in an Egyptian jail.

Until Jacob was willing to let go of Benjamin, he wouldn't be able to see Joseph. Just as Moses' mother had to let go of her baby Moses, so that she could have him back as a prince of Egypt. We must let go of what we are holding onto so tightly that we can receive what the Lord has for us.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) Our conscience cannot be trusted completely. Because it can be seared according to what we justify to accommodate our sins. But the Word of God is always trustworthy.

Heb 3:15 while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

2) To excuse people who are not sincerely repentant is to make them a worse sinner.

3) We must let go of what we are holding onto so tightly so that we can receive what the Lord has for us.