

49. The seared conscience awakened by guilt

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In the latter part of Genesis 41, we were told that a severe famine struck Egypt as well as all the known world during that period. 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 22 years have passed 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 and they did their best to banish the thought from their minds.

I wouldn't doubt that 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 Egyptian prime minister whom God will use to awaken their slumbering consciences and reunite a divided house.

A. JOSEPH'S DREAMS COME TO REALITY

Genesis 42:1-6 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." 5 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.

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.

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 7-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.

22 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)

Guilt is not necessarily a bad thing. The guilt feeling we experience is the symptom of the real problem, which is sin. All of the psychological counseling in the world cannot relieve a person of his or her guilt. We can pretend it is not there or try to find someone else to blame for our problems. But the only real and effective way to remove our guilt is to get to the root of the problem, which is sin.

As long as mankind is sinners, by birth and by behavior, we have guilt that cannot be removed with anything but God's grace. That's why Jesus came to save the wretched sinners like us.

B. ENCOUNTER IN EGYPT

Genesis 42:7-20 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!" 10 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!' 15 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.

To help us gain a clearer picture of this scene, let's look at some of the reasons why the brothers did not recognize Joseph:

1) Remember that more than 22 years have passed.

The teenage 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 through an interpreter to carry on their conversation.

2) Hebrews 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 Walmart 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, certainly not Egyptian prime minister.

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

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 of his older brothers are down on their faces before him.

When the test of severe trouble is applied, and when men 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 caused it.

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

C. 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 the admission of guilt.

To fully appreciate the intensity of this conversation, it's helpful to know that the word 'we' used here in the Hebrew language 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 or having partiality. 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 tends to see 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 income tax. But our consciences are notoriously

weak or corrupt. One man wrote the IRS, "Dear Internal Revenue Service, I have not been able to sleep at night because I cheated on last year's income tax. Enclosed find a cashier's check for \$1,000. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the balance."

Do you need to own up to something you have done? Or are you playing the blame game? I heard one summary of blame put this way: "Blame never affirms; it always assaults. Blame never solves; it always complicates. Blame never unites; it always separates. Blame never smiles; it always frowns. Blame never forgives; it always rejects. Blame never forgets; it always remembers. Blame never builds; it always destroys."

How true! We tend to say, "It's everybody's fault but mine." But there is going to have to come to a point in your life when you say, "I have sinned. I have committed this iniquity. The problem is me." The day you confess your sins and turn to God will be the day God will change your life.

D. NINE BROTHERS RETURN TO CANAAN

Genesis 42:25-38 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?" 29 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."

They feel that this is the judgment of God upon them. Ordinarily, it would have been great news and a wonderful thing to have your money returned to you. But they were terrified because they were already suspected as spies. Now they can be accused as thieves also. Going back to Egypt to get more food and Simeon does not sound so exciting.

Poor old Jacob! He's no longer the cocky individual we once knew, nor is he quite the man of faith that we shall see a little later. He is not bragging now but is very pessimistic. He makes Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh look like an optimist.

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.

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 tight that we can receive what the Lord has for us.

E. 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.

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

2) Forgiving people who are not sincerely repentant does not help them become better, rather worse.

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