

“The Weight of a Guilty Conscience”

Genesis 42:1-38

Turn with me in your Bibles this morning to Genesis 42 as we continue in our series on the life of Joseph. Thus far in our study, we’ve traced the activity of God in Joseph’s life as he was cast into the pit by his brothers, purchased as a slave by Potiphar, and thrown into a prison on the basis of false accusation. Then, we’ve witnessed his exaltation in Egypt as he is elevated to the position of prime minister by Pharaoh. God’s purpose in his life involved elevating him to the place where he could provide salvation for his family, to which the scene now returns in chapter 42. (Read)

Your conscience is a powerful thing, a built-in mechanism that serves as a warning light when it comes to sin. The Bible says that every person is born with the law of God written upon the heart, or stamped upon the conscience. Every person has a conscience which will then accuse or excuse, depending on how the person responds to that law. Paul makes this point in:

Romans 2:14-15—“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.”

Man has been made in the image of God. This is why man has a sense of morality, even though that sense has been affected by his sin. It means that every person has some inward sense of right and wrong. The moral standard of God’s righteousness is stamped into the inner ‘conscience’ of all men, no matter how far from the law of God they may be. While it is not an infallible guide, your

conscience is an important part of your humanity which has been implanted within you by your Creator. The word 'conscience' is really a compound word that literally means 'with knowledge.' So that conscience is 'knowledge along with us' or specifically the knowledge we carry 'within' us. Now, I could preach an entire sermon on this, but for the sake of time, let me just mention a few things by way of introduction for us to understand about the importance of your conscience based on what the Bible has to say about it:

- **Conscience is universal, inherent within humanity**

Every person has a conscience, and their conscience is either going to 'accuse' or 'excuse' them. Why? Due to the simple fact that the basic principles of God's law have been written on the human heart. All people know the essential principles of right and wrong behavior and their basis in an objective reality, a standard by which we are to be judged. No matter where you travel in the world, you will find that all have an inward sense that there is right and wrong, a moral standard to which our 'conscience' bears witness. It is as true of the person who lives in the deepest jungle of the world as it is of the person in uptown Charlotte.

- **Conscience is intentional, demanding responsibility**

The Bible speaks of those with a 'weak' conscience and compares it to the one that has been conditioned by the truth of God's grace. Conscience is something that can be trained and strengthened by the truth. But in the opposite way, a person can sin against the light of his conscience to the degree that it becomes seared and desensitized. This is a thing that Paul describes in:

1 Timothy 4:1-2—“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and

teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.”

In other words, sin has twisted their minds and conscience to such a degree that wrong seems right and right seems wrong. Can anything more appropriate be said to describe our own time?

- **Conscience is practical, reminding us of accountability**

And though conscience is not a perfect thing, it is a very powerful thing.

Conscience has the power to bless us or condemn us, to accuse us or excuse us. It can drive us to do great things in life, or it can lead us to anger, it results in sleepless nights, and an unending cycle of despair. And people will go to all kinds of extremes to soothe their guilty conscience.

When the law of God has been broken, your conscience acts as a guilt-producing warning device. John Wesley said that the conscience functions in at least three ways:

“First, it is a witness, testifying to what we have done in thought, or word, or action. Second, it is a judge, passing sentence on what we have done, that it is good or evil. And third, in some sort, it executes the sentence by the occasion of a degree of satisfaction in him that does well and a degree of uneasiness in him that does evil.”

You can ignore your conscience and persist in sin, and the effect will be a cauterized conscience. That is, you persist in sin to such a degree while ignoring your conscience that you have lost a sense of feeling altogether. You may even adopt a value system that convinces you that you are right. Listen to what one person has written:

John MacArthur — *“In the same way that pain is a physical warning mechanism that tells people they have a bodily injury or illness, the conscience is a spiritual warning mechanism that alerts of conduct dangerous to the soul. Of course, to function effectively, the conscience must be informed by right standards, because it is only a reactor to the person’s convictions about right and wrong. If ill-informed by falsehoods and lies, the conscience will still react to those untruths that govern an individual’s beliefs. Conscience is thus not in itself an independent system of morality. Rather, it operates based on whatever knowledge and belief system that informs it, and in response to the cultural conditions surrounding it. If the level of moral and spiritual knowledge is drawn from any other source than Scripture, the conscience (like that of the Islamic suicide bomber who is convinced he is doing God’s work) will function in response to those false ideas. It can be silenced not only by being misinformed, but by being constantly ignored or overridden, until it is scarred and unresponsive.”*

One of the most precious gifts associated with salvation is a cleansed conscience. A clean conscience provides us with confidence whenever we approach God in worship and in prayer. It is necessary for that confidence. And so with all of that being said, let’s get back to our story. The ten brothers who betrayed Joseph are now going to stand before him. It is evident in the text that the crime they had perpetrated against their brother is still looming large over their heads. They have a guilty conscience. God uses a trial to awaken their conscience so they can be reconciled to their brother. It reminds us that when we acknowledge our guilt, we will become aware of our need to be saved, and we discover the great provision we have in Christ. And so from the experience of Joseph’s brothers, we can learn some important truth about the conscience:

1—CONSCIENCE stirred by circumstances (42:1-17)

“When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, ‘Why do you look at one another?’ And he said, ‘Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.’ So ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt...”

Since chapter 37, the scene has focused on Joseph while in Egypt. Notice that the scene shifts back to the land of Canaan, back to Jacob, and back to the sons of Israel.

Their experience

The famine had not only affected the Egyptians, but was all encompassing. Things had gotten bad everywhere, and it included Canaan. Verse 1 tells us that Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, and he says to his sons, “Why do you look at one another?” Now, what parent has not said the same thing to their children? I guarantee you that less than a week after your kids were out of school for summer, some of you moms said, “Why do you look at one another?” Get outside! Go ride your bike. Go play in the creek. Go to the neighbor’s house. Or at least that’s the way it was when I was growing up. The point is, don’t just sit around—do something. Be active about your present situation. That is what Jacob is saying here to his sons, for the situation was desperate. It was a ‘live or die’ situation, and there was no time to waste. Yet they’re procrastinating and there may be more going on here than a simple glance will reveal. Egypt is the place where grain was to be found. But Egypt was also the place where their brother had been forsaken. No wonder they’ve avoided it thus far.

Shakespeare—*“Conscience doth make cowards of us all.”*

It is the same reason a thief doesn't want to revisit a bank that he's robbed. Or why a person will go out of their way to avoid the person they've wronged. Egypt was the last place on earth the brothers would have wanted to go, but the situation demanded it. There was no other option. We can't be saved from our sin until we're first confronted with the reality of it. And so verse 3 says that ten of Joseph's brothers head off down to Egypt to buy grain. Maybe you have heard of the 'Dirty Dozen' (the old WWII film with Lee Marvin and Charles Bronson)? Well, let's call these guys the 'Guilty Ten.' These guilty ten head off to Egypt without their youngest brother, Benjamin, due to the fact that Jacob cannot bear the thought of losing him.

Their encounter

Once they are in Egypt, they will find themselves in the line with everyone else who has come looking for grain. Notice verse 6 says, "Now Joseph was governor over the land, he was the one who sold to all the people." Now listen to this: "And Joseph's brothers came and bowed before him with their faces to the ground." Talk about coming full circle! It had not dawned on them just who it was that they would be bowing down to. Verse 7-8 says, "Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them," but they don't recognize him. There are obvious reasons for that. At this point it had been more than 20 years since they had last seen their brother. Then, he was only 17. Now he is a middle aged man with several hard years under his belt. His face is well worn. Consider also the fact that he is dressed like an Egyptian, he speaks Egyptian, and he is in a position of high authority. So for all they know, this is an Egyptian lord who now holds their life in the balance. Think of it—the one they have offended is in the position to snuff them out of existence. With a single word, and they'd be gone. They bow before him with their faces to the ground. Notice that verse 9 says, "And Joseph

remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them.” What were those dreams? Remember how he had told his brothers many years before:

Genesis 37:7—“Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field and behold my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.”

It fueled their hatred of Joseph even more as they interpret it to mean he would reign and rule over them. They hated him for his dreams and for his words. And so all of that is now flooding Joseph’s memory.

Their examination

Recognizing them, Joseph treats them like strangers and speaks roughly to them —“Who are you, and where have you come from?” So they tell him that they’ve come from Canaan to buy food. He says to them in verse 9, “You are spies! You have come to see the nakedness of the land.” It was a delay tactic so that Joseph could single them out from the rest of the crowd. And more than that, it is a way of confronting them with their past. Do you remember how they had mistreated him for being dad’s little spy in chapter 37? Now, the tables are turned in reverse. Denying that they are spies and explaining their intentions, notice they plead their case in verse 11 by saying, “We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies.” We are ‘honest’ men. The fact of the matter is that they stood before one who knew the truth.

Now, what I want you to see is how God is using a number of factors to bring these men face to face with their sins—

- The problem of circumstance
- The pain of confrontation

- The pressure of confinement
- The proof of conviction

What has God used in your own life to get your attention? It could be that He has used the circumstances of life, all of its difficulties and disappointments. You've felt the pinch of deprivation and emptiness. Or, perhaps He has used the pain associated with confrontation, much like the prophet Nathan's words to King David—"You are the man!" Maybe He has used the confinements of life, those seasons where He has placed you flat on your back at the bottom with no place to look but up. Rest assured that God will stop at no lengths when it comes to stirring up our conscience so that we can get right with Him. A second thing here involves:

2—CONFESSION spurred by conviction (42:18-25)

"On the third day Joseph said to them, 'Do this and you will live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die.' And they did so. Then they said to one another, 'In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us..."

Now that he has gotten their attention, Joseph presses the situation a bit further. He isolates them in confinement for three days, and on the third day he gives them an option. He says to them in verse 18, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God. If you truly are 'honest' men, let one of you stay here in custody while the rest of you go and carry grain for your households. But bring your youngest brother back to me, and your words will be verified and you shall not die." They

all agree to the terms. But now watch what happens as they begin to talk among themselves and try to reason as to why all of this was happening.

It was honest

Verse 21, “Then they said to one another, ‘In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.’” In truth we are guilty. That’s an honest admission from these men, and it is the same admission that every sinner must make before he or she can be saved. The problem in our time is that nobody is guilty of anything anymore. The very concept of guilt is considered obsolete. And it is especially taboo to come to church nowadays and be made to feel guilty.

When it comes to getting honest about our sin, there can be no denial of personal responsibility. It is far easier for someone to say ‘I’m sick’ than for that person to say “I’m a sinner.” Sickness isn’t something that I can help, but I’m a sinner by birth and by choice. A person’s sin is a serious offense against a holy God. Personal guilt is at the heart of what must always be confronted when dealing with our sin. When we try to explain away guilt, it will always do violence against our conscience. We make ourselves out to be the victim instead of the perpetrator.

Charles Sykes — *“The National Anthem has become the Whine. Increasingly, Americans act as if they had received a lifelong indemnification from misfortune and a contractual release from personal responsibility...If you lose your job you can sue for the mental distress of being fired. If your bank goes broke, the government has insured your deposits. If you drive drunk and crash you can sue somebody for failing to warn you to stop drinking. [If you spill your coffee and are*

burned, you can sue McDonald's for not putting a warning on the cup.] There is always somebody else to blame."

In truth we are guilty. Now, I fully realize that guilt might not always be warranted in a situation where a person truly is a victim. But the guilt that comes over breaking God's moral law is necessary to drive us to repentance. Guilt functions in the spiritual realm like pain in the material realm. Pain tells us there is a physical problem that must be dealt with, or our body will suffer harm. Guilt is a spiritual pain in the soul that tells us something is wrong and needs to be dealt with and cleansed. And once that sin has been cleansed, you are then free from the bondage of guilt.

*No guilt in life, no fear in death
This is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath
Jesus commands my destiny
No power of hell, no scheme of man
Can ever pluck me from His hand
Till He returns or calls me him
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand*

It was heard

Something else that is significant here is that Joseph hears their confession of guilt. As they are communicating with one another in Hebrew, they had no idea that Joseph could understand every word. The one that they had wronged so long ago is listening to them admit to their wrongdoing. His reaction in verse 24 is to turn away from them and weep. It is here that we are given a glimpse into Joseph's heart. He is filled with emotion as the pain that he had been carrying

around for years resurfaces. He is overcome by love for his brothers, but the time for him to reveal himself to them had not yet come.

3—CONFIDENCE shaken by concern (42:26-38)

“Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed. And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money in the mouth of his sack. He said to his brothers, ‘My money has been put back; here it is in the mouth of my sack!’ At this their hearts failed them, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’”

Their conscience has been stirred by circumstances, and their confession is brought on by conviction. Then notice how their confidence is shaken by concern. Fear and this sense of dread now fills their hearts.

Loss of inner tranquility

Verse 27 says that when they stop for the night, one of them opens up his sack of grain only to find his money in the mouth of the sack. When he shows it to the rest of the group, the Bible says that their hearts failed them and they turned trembling to one another. Why not see the silver in the sack as a blessing? Why not say, “We don’t know how that got there, but praise the Lord for it!” Because when you’re not right with God, you can’t enjoy the blessings of God. You live with a sense of fear and dread that always looks back over its shoulder. But if that is true, it is a sign that your conscience is being stirred so that you can do something about it.

Proverbs 10:22—“The blessing of the Lord makes rich, and He adds no sorrow with it.”

Conviction awakens the conscience. What was previously ignored, justified, or hidden is now exposed. And this inner awareness produces discomfort as guilt arises, peace is replaced by restlessness, and the soul is no longer at ease because it senses its accountability.

Isaiah 48:22—“There is no peace for the wicked.”

Conviction often brings with it a fear of judgment, exposure, and the need for repentance. That fear then further robs a person of tranquility, because they are no longer secure in their standing. That is what Joseph’s brothers are facing in their own lives. The chickens are coming home to roost. It results in them now having a:

Sense of divine accountability

Their question in verse 28 is this, “What is this that God has done to us?” In all of these chapters of Genesis, and despite all that we read about the sons of Jacob, this is the first time that any of them mention God. Now, we’ve seen that Joseph is a God-centered man, and God is frequently on his lips. But not his brothers. That is, not until now. It is God who is calling them into account for their sins. So that now, through circumstances which have awakened their conscience, led to confession of their guilt, and confidence shaken with concern, these men are under conviction. But that is a good thing, and it must be the same for every man or woman who truly comes to Jesus Christ for salvation.

Alistair Begg — *“If Jacob’s cupboards had been well-stocked with food, Joseph’s brothers would not have cared enough to make the trip to Egypt, and thus they would not have found their brother and experienced his great provision for them. It is only when God shows us that the cupboard of our own supposed*

righteousness is absolutely bare that we are ready to admit our need and come humbly to Him who is the Bread of Life.”

The Lord is using all of these things in the lives of Joseph’s brothers in order to bring them to repentance. So that their story will be one of undeserved, unmerited grace. Joseph is a picture of that grace in Christ. He is the one against whom these men have sinned. He has suffered, yet it will be his suffering and exaltation that brings them salvation. And the bread that they now have from him is without price, for their money is no good. That’s the wonder of grace!

Isaiah 55:1-2—“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

Admitting personal guilt is the first step toward living with a clean conscience. Some here this morning have lived as long as Joseph’s brothers with things in your past about which you have never personally admitted your guilt. You have never taken responsibility. And there will no true rest for you until, like the prodigal son, you come to your senses and confess your sin and come to Jesus. My friends, the weight of a guilty conscience is a hard and heavy thing with which to live. However, the freedom of a clean conscience is a peaceful, joyous thing. David writes about this:

Psalms 32:1—“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”

Blessed is the man against whom the Lord “counts” no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. He counts no iniquity to the one whose sin was counted

to Christ! So that now Christ's righteousness is counted to the one who is forgiven and justified. The guilt has been removed, for my sins have been covered with the precious blood of the Lamb. Which means that I can now live in the freedom of a clean conscience. My friend, do you need to be freed from the bondage of a guilty conscience? Do you want to live in the joy of knowing that you are right with God?

Titus 1:15-16—“To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny Him by their works and are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.”

I wonder how many in the room this morning are living with the burden of a defiled conscience? And you've not been honest with God, others, or yourself. No matter how hard you try, you can't escape the hound that is hot on your trail.

- The one who has been cheating on his income tax
- The one who has been lying and cheating his way through school
- The one who has been gossiping behind another's back
- The one who has been stealing from the company
- The one who has been sleeping around with her boyfriend
- The one who has been looking at internet pornography

Friends, sin always defiles the conscience. There are times I feel our worship on Sunday is like trying to raise the dead, due to the fact that the Holy Spirit is being quenched by the defiled consciences of many. Friends, we're not here to play games. I'm not preaching this morning to impress people. My aim is not to make

you feel comfortable in your disobedience. That's the problem with far too many preachers in our generation. They do nothing more than offer group therapy sessions that make disobedient people who have a guilty conscience feel better about their sin. Paul said:

1 Timothy 1:5—“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”

Disavowing personal responsibility before God will never free us from a sense of guilt. To refuse to acknowledge your sin only compounds its bondage. The Bible says:

Proverbs 28:13—“He that covers his sins shall not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy.”

1 John 1:8-9—“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Isaac Watts wrote a hymn he entitled, “O Wash My Soul From Every Sin, And Make My Guilty Conscience Clean.” The lyrics say:

*Cleanse me, O Lord, and cheer my soul
with Your forgiving love;
O make my broken spirit whole,
and bid my pains remove.
Create anew my yearning heart,
and fill it with Your light.
Your Spirit never will depart,
nor drive me from Your sight.*

*Give me the presence of Your grace;
then my rejoicing tongue
shall speak aloud Your righteousness,
and make Your praise my song!*