

“AWAKENING A GUILTY CONSCIENCE” (Genesis 42:1-24)

As a kid, I remember memorizing a verse from the book of Numbers that said “Be sure your sin will find you out.” I didn’t know what that verse meant, but I found out one summer when we were on a family vacation back in Yellowstone National Park. After watching the Old Faithful Geyser erupt, we went to have lunch right next door at the Old Faithful Inn. As we were sitting down at our table, a man walked up behind my dad and tapped him on the shoulder. My dad turned around and said, “Ron Dilday, what are you doing here?” Ron went to our church back in Oregon where my dad was the pastor. What are the chances that two people from the same little place in Oregon – 1000 miles away – not to mention the same church – would end up in Yellowstone at the same time?

Ron seemed very nervous and asked if he could speak with my dad in private. I learned later that Ron was there at the Inn with a woman who was not his wife. When he saw my dad walk in, he said it was like God Himself walked in and he was overcome with guilt. The last person he expected to see hundreds of miles from home was his pastor! It got his attention for sure and that’s when I understand what “Be sure your sins will find you out.” God has a way of bringing our sins to light to bring us back in line with His will.

Today in our study of Joseph we have a powerful example of how God awakens a guilty conscience, and it’s seen in the lives of Joseph’s brothers who twenty years earlier threw Joseph in a pit and sold him as a slave to a caravan of traders heading for Egypt. Not only that, but they deceived their father Jacob into thinking that Joseph was killed by a ferocious animal. For twenty years they had settled into a comfortable, routine life in the land of Canaan, never bringing up the subject of Joseph or what they did to him. They may have forgotten, but God hadn’t, and now that Joseph is in a position of leadership in Egypt, God begins the process of awakening their consciences and bringing what they did to Joseph fully into the light.

In the bigger picture of the Bible, God chose the twelve sons of Jacob to play a prominent role in God’s plan to save the world through Jesus. They will become the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel, and it is through them that Jesus would come into the world. But in order for God to use them, He had to break them and turn their hearts to him. And before us this morning is the remarkable story of how God does that.

In our passage today we will see four ways God awakens their guilty consciences – and are ways that He still uses today in our own lives. The first way is through **desperation**. In verses 1-5 we read... “When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, ‘Why do you just keep looking at each other?’ He continued, ‘I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die.’ Then ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph’s brother, with the others, because he was afraid that harm might come to him. So Israel’s sons were among those who went to buy grain, for there was famine in the land of Canaan also.”

Just as Joseph predicted – by way of Pharaoh’s dream – after seven years of plenty, there was a worldwide famine. Most of us have no idea what it’s like to experience hunger – we just pop down to the store and get what we need – we complain about the prices, but at least we have food. But in ancient times, when a famine hit there was nothing to fall back on, and the desperation was acute.

With no crops to tend to, the brothers passively idle away their time. Jacob, the old man, looks at his sons and says, “Are you guys going to sit there and let us starve the death? The word is that there’s grain in Egypt,” Jacob says, “Go down there and buy some before we die of hunger.” It’s the equivalent of a parent saying, “Get a job. Don’t just sit there, do something.”

In verse 3 they go, but it says that Jacob keeps his youngest son, Benjamin, home with him. Benjamin is Joseph’s only full-blood brother, born to Jacob’s favorite wife Rachel. Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin, creating a strong bond between Jacob and his youngest son. After what happened to his favorite son Joseph, Jacob is not about to let anything happen to his beloved youngest son.

Twenty years after Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery, God begins a long process of awakening their consciences, and the first thing He uses is desperation. Nothing gets our attention like hunger. When there’s food in the refrigerator, when you have a stockpile of food in reserve, you take daily provisions for granted and forget about God. But when your stomach’s growling, you think differently. When you’re hungry, nothing else really matters.

Just ask the prodigal son. He takes off from his father to live the good life in a distant country. He pictures the believer who turns his or her back on God to pursue the fleeting pleasures of sin. After he spent all his money, there’s a severe famine in the country and he becomes hungry. God was getting his attention, but rather than go back and face his father, he goes to work for a pig farmer and was so desperate for food he was willing to eat pig food, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, “What have I done? I had everything I wanted in my father’s home, but now I’m starving to death, longing to eat pig food.” He got up and went home to his father, who was waiting for him with open arms.

Maybe you’re facing a desperate situation today – and it could be that God is using it to wake you up. You’ve left God out of your life and have gone your own way. But something inside is missing – you’re hungry – you’re miserable – and you’re not fulfilled. What is God trying to tell you? He’s trying to tell you that only He can fill your life with meaning and fulfillment, and He uses the emptiness you feel to drive you back to Him.

The second way God awakens a guilty conscience is **reaping what you sow**. All the things the brothers did to Joseph now boomerang back on them. Verses 6-13... “Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph’s brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. ‘Where do you come from?’ he asked. ‘From the land of Canaan,’ they replied, ‘to buy food.’”

Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, ‘You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected.’ ‘No, my lord,’ they answered. ‘Your servants have come to buy food. We are all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies.’ ‘No!’ he said to them. ‘You have come to see where our land is unprotected.’ But they replied, ‘Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more.’”

Talk about drama! As soon as the brothers enter Egypt, they’re directed to the man everyone is sent to see – the man Pharaoh put in charge of the famine relief – and notice what they do when they come into his presence – they bow. Does that ring a bell? Twenty years earlier God gave Joseph a dream that one day his brothers would bow down to him – he didn’t know when or where or why – but he believed it would happen, and now it does.

By now Joseph is used to seeing people from all over the world come for grain – it’s another ordinary day, and he looks up and does a double-take. There before him are all ten of his older brothers. Inside he becomes a 17-year-old kid all over again with all the emotions he felt the day his brothers betrayed him come flooding back. He’s waited for this day for over two decades, and he has the power to send his brothers to a torture chamber and make them feel the pain they inflicted on him.

But Joseph is not like his brothers – he’s not vindictive. He’s not going to punish them, but neither is he going to quickly trust them. He decides to test them to see what’s in their heart. It’s been twenty years since he’s seen them and he needs to know what kind of men they are – have they changed or are they the same cold-hearted crew that threw him in a pit and sold him off for a few dollars? Joseph decides to test them – not out of revenge – if he wanted revenge, he’d just have them executed. He tests them to see how they respond to the exact same treatment with which they treated him. When they get a dose of their own medicine, how will they respond?

One question, however, lingers in our mind. How did Joseph’s brothers not recognize him? He knew who they were, but they didn’t realize they were standing before Joseph. One reason is that Joseph looked much different. He looked like an Egyptian, and he dressed like Egyptian. He was clean-shaven, his head was shaved, and he was wearing the royal robes of an Egyptian monarch. When Joseph spoke to his brothers, he did so in Egyptian, using an interpreter. He didn’t appear to understand their language. The last time they saw Joseph was when he was a teenager, and now he’s a grown man, almost 40 years old. The last person they expect to be standing in authority before them is Joseph.

Joseph proceeds to treat them the same way they treated him. First, he speaks harshly to them... “Where do you come from?” When Joseph received his coat of many colors from his father, chapter 37 says his brothers could not speak a kind word to him. When Joseph told them his dream of them bowing down to him, his brothers mocked him... “Do you think you’re going to rule over us?” Now the tables are turned and Joseph speaks harshly to them.

Secondly, he accuses them of being spies. “You have come to see where our land is not well-defended so you can attack us and steal our food.” Years earlier, Joseph’s brothers accused him of being a spy. Because Joseph’s father trusted him, he occasionally sent him out to check on his brothers, but his brothers considered him a snitch and hated him. Finally, when Joseph went to check on them near Dothan, their hatred for him boiled over. They plotted to kill him, but eventually settled on selling him for twenty shekels.

Three different times Joseph accuses them of being spies, and each time the anxiety level of the brothers increases. They had just come to buy food, and now they’re being accused of a crime punishable by death. They vehemently protested their innocence... “We’re not spies – we’re honest men – we’re good people from a good family – we just came here for food.”

In verse 13 they say... “Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more.” “The one is no more,” speaking of Joseph, who is standing right before them. They don’t know if one of their brothers is alive or dead – but he is no more. How painful that must have been for Joseph to hear, but any pain he felt was overcome by the news that his father and younger brother Benjamin were alive.

Each time Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies, they say, “We’re not – we’re honest.” But are they? Can they be trusted? Joseph has to find out, which brings us to the third way God uses to awaken their guilty conscience through Joseph is **suspended trust**. Joseph doesn’t know if he can trust his brothers, so he designs a test to find out.

Verses 14-17... “Joseph said to them, ‘It is just as I told you: You are spies! And this is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies!’ And he put them all in custody for three days.”

Joseph keeps ramping up the pressure – first, he speaks harshly to them, then he accuses them of being spies, and now he says, “There’s one way you can prove your innocence and prove you are telling the truth – you can bring me your youngest brother – but only one of you can go – the rest of you will stay behind as hostages.” The pressure keeps building and building, and pressure has a way of revealing what’s really in a person. That’s why God tests us – to prove what is really in us.

Psalms 66:10-12 speaks of how God later tested the twelve tribes of Israel... “For you, God, tested us; you refined us like silver. You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.” To determine the quality of silver, the raw metal is placed in an extremely hot fire to remove all the impurities. The impurities – everything that is not silver – rises to the surface as is skimmed off until all that’s left is the pure silver.

Throughout our lives God uses tests and trials to test the purity of our faith. We can say we have strong faith, but we really don't know what our faith is like until the heat is turned up and our faith is exposed for what it really is. All the bad stuff – all the impurities, the sin and rebellion rises to the surface so God can skim it off, and what's left is pure silver. And the only way that can happen is by pressure.

Joseph's brothers feel the heat as Joseph has them put in prison for three days to think about what they'll do. Imagine being a fly on the wall during these three days... "What are we going to do? You know dad will never part with Benjamin. But if we don't do what this guy says, we're all dead." There was no doubt a great deal of finger pointing and blame shifting going on – and through it all God is stirring their conscience to bring them to repentance.

Verses 18-20... "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 stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households. But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die.' This they proceeded to do."

Joseph changes his plan a bit – instead of holding nine brothers in prison and sending back one brother back home to get Benjamin, he decides to keep only one brother hostage and send the other nine brothers back. This change may have been a matter of practicality – nine brothers can carry more grain than one. It's evident that the brothers want to be trusted, but if Joseph is going to trust them, he has to see some evidence that they are trustworthy. "If you are honest men," he says, "you'll bring your younger brother back to me."

The story of Joseph teaches us a great deal about forgiveness and trust. Joseph will ultimately forgive his brothers the wrong done to him, but forgiveness does not mean that he automatically trusted them. Forgiveness is something the Bible commands to do – and our forgiveness of others is based on God's forgiveness of us. If you are forgiven by God, you have the capacity and the obligation to forgive others. But forgiveness does not mean that you forget everything that happened to you or excuse someone for the harm they've caused. It means that you release the person who hurt you to God. You say, "Lord, what you do with them is up to you – I believe it when you say that vengeance is yours, you will repay. But I'm not going to repay them – I'm going to give them over to you, and I'm going to release any bitterness or anger I have towards them."

Forgiveness is given freely, but trust is earned. Once a person has been forgiven, he or she still must restore your trust by repeated good actions, and this takes time. Our responsibility is to offer them the chance to rebuild that trust, and Joseph models this perfectly for us in this passage. He will forgive them, but before he can trust them, he has to know their heart.

The next step in the brother's moral awakening is **conviction**. Verses 21-23... "They said to one another, 'Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come on us.' Reuben replied, 'Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood.' They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter."

All the guilt that the brothers had buried and subdued comes flooding back. They don't realize Joseph is listening, but they agree that what's happening to them is just punishment for what they did to Joseph. They remember how Joseph, at the bottom of a dark pit, pleaded for his life while they casually sat down to eat a meal – and they could see the anguish on his face as he was chained to a wagon and carried off into captivity. "We're guilty," they say, "and we're getting what we deserve." Reuben says, "I told you so – I told you at the time not to do anything to him, but you wouldn't listen, and we are accountable for his blood." This meant the death penalty. They didn't actually kill Joseph, but for all they knew, they had – and they led their father to believe that Joseph was dead. Their sleeping conscience is waking up.

In one of his short stories, *The Telltale Heart*, Edgar Allan Poe wrote about a murderer who couldn't sleep because he kept hearing the beating heart of his victim down in his basement. What he heard was not his victim's heart, but his own heart, pounding in his chest. His own guilt awoke him, and it finally led to his confession. The brothers' crime was now more than two decades old, but they had not truly forgotten. Time does not erase a guilty conscience.

If guilt is not brought to the surface and addressed, it takes a tremendous toll on our soul and body. David lived with the guilt of his sin with Bathsheba for over a year, and here's what he writes in Psalm 32... "When I kept silent about my sin, my bones wasted away, through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was drained as in the heat of summer" (Psalm 32:2-3). The pressure never let up. James Boice said "A person can sear his conscience until it doesn't condemn him, but the only way that silences the conscience, without turning the person into a monster with no conscience, is confession of the wrong and restitution." God uses a guilty conscience to bring us to face our actions and the consequences of our sin.

Conviction of sin is an essential part of coming to saving faith in Jesus, and according to John 16:8 it is the Holy Spirit that awakens us to our sin and our need for a Savior. John writes, "And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."

The reason conviction is so important is because without conviction there can be no conversion. If an unbeliever is not aware that their sin separates them from a holy God, and is not convinced that they need God's forgiveness in order to be right with Him, they will not repent and turn from their sins. And if they do not repent and turn from their sins, they will be judged. That's why there is no conversion without conviction. God sent the Holy Spirit to make people aware of their sin, to awaken their conscience, so that they would see their need for a Savior, repent of their sins, and escape judgment.

J.I. Packer said that the Holy Spirit works as humanity's prosecutor, working in hearts to say, "I am guilty, I need forgiveness." But where a prosecutor looks to have a defendant judged, the Holy Spirit works to have a sinner escape judgment. It is not God's will that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

A great example of the convicting work of the Spirit is the Apostle Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2 says that the people who were listening to Peter were "cut to the heart." The word "cut" used in this verse means "to pierce," or "to stab," thus indicating something sudden and unexpected occurred, something that only the Holy Spirit could bring about. The people then asked Peter, "What shall we do?" 3000 people received Christ that day. Peter's message combined with the conviction of the Holy Spirit to bring about conversion.

My dad accepted Christ on Easter Sunday in 1948. He said that during this time period when people came forward to accept Christ there was a real sense of guilt. People wept over their sin and had an appreciation of what Jesus did to forgive their sins. But then my dad began to notice that somewhere along the line people stopped feeling guilty. If they made a decision about Jesus there did not seem to be an accompanying sense of guilt over sin.

One of the marks of postmodernism is that there is little or no sense of guilt. We are taught that guilt is bad. It's bad to carry around guilt, so the answer is don't feel guilty. We would agree that it is unhealthy to carry around guilt, but the answer is not to pretend that guilt does not exist – the answer is to acknowledge guilt, grieve over it, and run to the only one who can relieve our guilt and make us whole. Deep down inside God has created every person with a conscience and a sense of right and wrong. The Holy Spirit works to draw that guilt to the surface so that we can be forgiven.

Once we're forgiven, and this is important, you no longer need to live with guilt and shame. Many do, but God's Word clearly says that when we confess our sin He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteous. The truth is that Jesus took your guilt and shame upon Himself on the cross so you no longer need to bear it.

Our passage ends in verse 24 by saying, "He turned away from them and began to weep, but then came back and spoke to them again. He had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes." When he hears his brothers confess their guilt, Joseph is overcome with emotion, but he still needs to discern if they are sincere and can be trusted. He chooses Simeon as the brother to stay behind as insurance the rest of the brothers will bring back Benjamin. Why Simeon? He's the second oldest brother. The oldest is Reuben, and Joseph shows his appreciation for Reuben's attempt to rescue him, so he chooses the next oldest brother. What's more, Simeon was likely the ringleader in plotting to have Joseph killed. God still had work to do in softening his heart.

So, how is your conscience this morning? Are there secrets buried deep inside that the Holy Spirit is trying to bring to the surface? Living with a guilty conscience is a miserable way to live, and God offers a way to experience a clean conscience. It's not by beating yourself up or simply feeling remorse, but by bringing your guilt to the cross of Christ, acknowledging your guilt, repenting of your sin, and living in authenticity – getting all of the secrets out of your closet and experiencing the grace and forgiveness of the Lord.