

## Week 6 – The Kindling of Conscience – Genesis 42:1-35

### Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 4:1-4

#### Introduction

Believe it or not, the United States Department of the Treasury has a fund that is used for voluntary contributions from people who have defrauded or stolen from the federal government called The Conscience Fund

The fund was created in 1811 when the government received an anonymous payment of \$5 but wasn't actually named until later when a check for \$1,500 arrived along with a note that said, "Suppose we call this a contribution to the conscience fund and get it announced in the newspapers, and perhaps we will get some more"

Perhaps the smallest donation was from a man who sent in 9 cents because he confessed he had reused a 3 cent postage stamp on three separate occasions and the largest was for \$155,502 received in 1990 for an unknown reason

As you might imagine most contributions to the fund are made anonymously and sometimes they come in from clergy as a result of deathbed confessions – which I believe calls into doubt the donor's true understanding of repentance

And the lack of a true understanding of the concept of repentance was clearly demonstrated by the letter that stated:

"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."

#### The human conscience is a strange thing indeed

Sometimes conscience positively plagues us as it shouts out our misdeeds but other times it barely whispers and it's even possible for us to silence our conscience altogether

Our Scripture reading from just a few moments ago spoke of a conscience that has been "seared" meaning it has been desensitized so that it no longer alerts the person to the wrong that they do

As we pick up the account of Joseph today in Genesis 42, several years have passed since he was put in charge of all of Egypt

We read at the end of Chapter 41 that the seven years of plenty foreshadowed by Pharaoh's dream have passed and the seven years of widespread famine are well underway

And when the people of Egypt cried out in hunger, Joseph ordered the storehouses to be opened and he began to sell the grain that had been set aside during the years of plenty

But the famine has now spread even beyond the boundaries of Egypt and when it was discovered that there was grain to be had in Egypt people began to come from far and wide to buy the grain

And in **Genesis 41:57** we read that Joseph was put in charge of the sale of grain so everyone desiring to buy had to come before Joseph

Let me encourage you to open your Bibles to Genesis 42 (page 35) and follow along as I read verses 1-3 (**Genesis 42:1-3**)

*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.*

And so, after focusing solely on Joseph for the past several chapters, Joseph's family is reintroduced to our narrative

From this point on the account ceases to be about Joseph alone as God begins to work through several avenues to awaken the consciences which the brothers have effectively silenced

We only have inferred clues as to the condition of the hearts of those ten men but we know from their actions that they were hard men who have repeatedly and callously engaged in abhorrent behavior of one kind or another from deception and murder to rape and incest – not to mention selling Joseph into slavery

**I believe we would be safe in saying that Joseph's ten brothers were unsaved men at this point in their lives**

But we need to also remember that each of these brothers was to be the patriarch of one of the twelve tribes of Israel  
So God needed to turn their hearts to him and it's through God's work on their consciences that we see them finally acknowledge God in a meaningful way – perhaps for the first time in their lives

In our passage this morning we are going to see God use four different devices to stimulate and revive the consciences of the ten brothers

First, we will see that **felt need begets action**

## **I. Felt Need Begets Action**

The famine has spread beyond the borders of Egypt so that it was “severe over all the earth” and that included Canaan where Jacob and Joseph's eleven brothers lived

Most commentators believe that the famine had been underway for two years when Jacob turned to his sons and asked them, “*Why do you look at one another?*”

**And the first matter we need to address concerns what that question is supposed to tell us**

I don't believe the brothers were at a loss for what to do and that they were just looking at one another stupidly as they starved – I believe to think that of them would be to give them too little credit as thinking adults

I believe the fact that they were looking at one another reveals that their consciences might well have been dulled but that they weren't fully dead just yet

After all, Egypt was where Joseph had been taken after they had sold him to the Midianites

And like most people who are guilty of something, they were reluctant to even mention Egypt let alone travel there

**Proverbs 28:1** says, “*The wicked flee when no one pursues...*” and the brothers had no doubt cast guilty looks at each other every time Egypt was mentioned

And we are left to wonder what they would have done had their father not spoken up and sent them to Egypt for grain

But God was at work and the first tool he used to start awakening their consciences was the famine because it caused them to travel to Egypt where the rest of the action was to take place

Last week we spoke about how more believers are impoverished by prosperity than are through adversity

And how, when everything is coming up roses we have the tendency to congratulate ourselves and forget all about God

So there are times when God has to bring prosperity to an end and allow us to experience the pain of deprivation in order to bring us back to him

That was certainly the case in the story of the prodigal son found in Luke 15

You will likely remember how the younger of a man's two sons demanded to be given his inheritance and how he travelled to a far country and wasted it in wild living and we read in **Luke 15:14-16** –

*And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

And then we see how it was the pain of an empty belly that finally caused him to return to his father and seek forgiveness

Now, Joseph's brothers were a bit tougher and it would take more than hunger pains to get them to turn and God had more stringent methods to come

But God used the pain of hunger to spur Joseph's brothers into action and start them on the journey that would bring them face-to-face with Joseph in Egypt so that the next tool to bring pressure could be employed

Of course, the brothers had no expectation that they would actually see Joseph let alone that he would have been elevated to the position of prime minister of Egypt

So when they actually stood before him in an effort to buy the grain they were after, they didn't recognize him

But why would they have?

After all, it's been at least twenty years and most commentators think it's likely the famine was two years long when the brothers travelled to Egypt which would make it 22 years since they had last seen Joseph

And the physical changes that take place in a man between the ages of 17 and 39 are typically profound

The last time the brothers had seen Joseph he was a mere youth and now he was a middle-aged man dressed like an Egyptian noble and speaking to them through an interpreter

But Joseph readily recognized his older brothers

The change in physical appearances at their ages would not be quite so profound and they would have been wearing the garb of his home country and, after all, there were ten of them all likely bearing a familial resemblance to one another

But we see in verse 7 (**Genesis 42:7**) that he *"treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them"*

And by so doing we are going to see that this **harsh treatment breaks their defenses**

## **II. Harsh Treatment Breaks Defenses**

From what we have seen of Joseph to this point, his treatment of his brothers seems very un-Joseph-like

Joseph has always cared for others and been kind even to those who have mistreated him

But I believe we will see that Joseph had his reasons for treating his brothers as he did and that it was for their own good

First, we see Joseph bark out the question concerning where the men had come from to which they answered truthfully

Then we read something in verse 9 (**Genesis 42:9**) that gives us a clue as to what is about to happen

*"And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them..."* and then he accused them of being spies who are in Egypt to look for weaknesses in their defenses

**What I believe is going on here is that Joseph is replaying the scene that took place at the mouth of the pit in Dothan those 22 years ago**

Of course, we aren't given all of the details of what took place back when Jacob sent Joseph to check on his brothers' welfare and he finally caught up to them on the plains of Dothan

But when you consider that his brothers already hated him for having previously reported their bad behavior to their father, is it really all that far-fetched to think they accused Joseph of being a spy seeking to do the same thing again?

Of course, Joseph would have tried to assure his brothers that he was only there to check on them because he cared for them and he would have pleaded his innocence – the very thing we see his brothers doing now as they stood before him

Like I say, this is a bit of conjecture but it seems plausible that his brothers relived what they had done to Joseph in that moment; based on the effect we will see his harsh words had on them

Like I said, this seems to be uncharacteristic behavior on Joseph's part but I don't believe he engaged in cruelty or that he was attempting to get even with his brothers here

I believe his words were harsh but carefully calculated to bring the memory of what they had done so long ago to the surface in all its ugliness so as to hopefully bring about confession and repentance

**God's Word is often speaks to us and it isn't always in soft tones that comfort us and promise us nice things**

No, Gods' Word sometimes convicts us of our sins and we don't always like what it has to say as oftentimes its words seem harsh as they function more as a corrective than a comfort

Some of you have told me that God has used what we've seen in this series to produce feelings that you didn't necessarily like as things you need to work on have been pointed out

I know that I also have been convicted as I've prepared and preached through Joseph's life so far and that there are other parts of the Bible that, if it were left up to me, might not be in there because they chafe as they convict

But unconfessed sin and uncorrected behaviors aren't healthy for us so we dare not bristle and resist the harsh treatment we often find when we read and study God's Word or hear it preached

God is always ready and waiting to give us comfort but comfort is for those who are pursuing righteousness and that sometimes means that God must confront us before he can comfort us

Sometimes, most times maybe, harsh words are enough to turn a child of God around – but not always

Joseph's brothers have been softened up a bit as his words reminded them of their past sins against their long-lost brother but they aren't quite ready yet so God employed another tactic to bring them around

And so we see next that Joseph makes an impossible demand of them and then has them cast into prison for a while and we see that **isolation breeds reflection**

### **III. Isolation Breeds Reflection**

Look with me at verses 14-17 (**Genesis 42:14-17**) –

*But Joseph said to them, "It is as I said to you. You are spies. By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of you, and let him bring your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. Or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies." And he put them all together in custody for three days.*

When we remember the brothers had no idea who they were speaking with we can see how impossible Joseph's demand for them to send one brother back would be

Here they were, being treated harshly and accused of being spies – a crime worthy of death – and they are expected to send one man back to retrieve the youngest brother?

How could they not suspect they would all be imprisoned or executed when the two returned?

So, Joseph left them in prison for three days before he summoned them to stand before him again

And when he did he modified his demand and said one brother must remain while the others would be allowed to go home with the sought after grain and return with the youngest brother to retrieve the one brother left behind

**But what I want you to notice is the change that being locked up for three days with nothing to do but think produced in the brothers**

Look with me at verses 21-22 (**Genesis 42:21-22**) –

*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." And Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood."*

Three days in the hole had changed their attitudes completely

The separation from life's unceasing demands, concerns, and distractions had served to focus their minds on their past deeds and in so doing they were made fully aware as to how they had displeased God

And after Joseph calls them forth we find out that their confinement had changed their thinking

God had used the three days of fearful isolation to stir up and intensify their guilt as they remembered how they had mistreated Joseph and this caused them to begin to reason from a spiritual perspective

Joseph's brothers to this point have shown us nothing that would indicate that they were in any way godly men

Thus far we have seen Simeon and Levi deceive and slaughter all the men of Shechem

Reuben, the eldest son, has openly slept with his father's concubine, Bilhah

Judah has had sexual relations with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, believing that she was a roadside prostitute

And those are just the recorded sins of the four oldest brothers and we have no reason to believe that these behaviors aren't indicative of their normal pattern or that the younger ones did anything but follow their example

I would suspect they were like most of the unsaved world in that they figured that God either didn't exist in the first place or that at the very least he wasn't a force to be reckoned with in any meaningful way

A popular saying today is, "Only God can judge me" as people want to believe there should be no restrictions placed on their behavior

But it's doubtful that most people who utter that phrase truly believe in a God who judges righteously because they really don't believe that there will ever be an accounting for their sins

### **I think Joseph's brothers probably fit into that category**

They had grown up in the same household as Joseph so they undoubtedly heard about God and probably even mentioned his name from time to time

But they weren't really convinced that this is God's universe and that every sin must and will have a reckoning

However, three days of isolation was ample time for them to contemplate their horrible mistreatment of Joseph which had just been reenacted for them in Joseph's harsh accusations and treatment of them

And they came out of their cell as changed men as they confessed their sin and recognized the need for recompense for it – by the way, last week we saw the first time the Holy Spirit is said to come upon a person and this is the first time that sin is confessed in Scripture so you might want to make a note in your Bible about that

We can be a lot like Joseph's brothers – I don't necessarily mean in the sense of rampant wickedness but more in the sense of failing to take time to contemplate and to think God's thoughts

We live in a time of profound and constant busy-ness that rarely, if ever, gives us a moment to just sit and think

But time alone with God is necessary for the Christian life and healthy Christian growth

Researchers are reporting how electronic devices are changing the way people think and process

How our attention spans are getting ever shorter and how we get nervous when we don't have a screen to distract us

And I know that's true in my own life as I catch myself reaching for my phone or my tablet or some other distraction to occupy my mind every time I have a moment to sit down

Rarely do I just sit quietly and commune with God or just allow God to direct my thoughts wherever he pleases

### **I had the privilege of going on a week-long working retreat all by myself last January and it was glorious**

It was a very precious and profitable week for me and I am hoping to get the chance to do it again this coming January

And I believe setting aside a block of time to simply be quiet would be a valuable exercise for every Christian

But because we are such go, go, go people who won't take a voluntary time-out; God sometimes has to intervene to slow us down

And he takes a person and isolates them from their normal routine through an illness or some other means and, as they are forcibly restricted, he takes the time that they wouldn't otherwise set aside to reach them

I want to encourage everyone to find a way to grab some solitude – even if only for a morning or an afternoon or even for an hour from time to time –

Because time alone with God is a valuable commodity even when there is no gross sin to be exposed

So far, we've seen God use the pain of a felt need to overcome the brothers' reluctance to go to Egypt and harsh treatment by Joseph to break down their defenses as they protested their innocence before his accusations and isolation to give them time to consider their ways

And while they've emerged from the dungeon with a new frame of mind and are now thinking spiritually for probably the first time in their lives there is still something missing

Joseph's brothers are without hope as they can see only the debt they owe and that they are facing a just and awful retribution for their sin

But that's about to change as God plants a seed that, although it is misunderstood at first and must have time to grow, shows his presence and loving care for the brothers as we see an act of **unexpected grace bespeaks God**

#### **IV. Unexpected Grace Bespeaks of God**

The brothers really had no choice but to leave one of their number behind and do as Joseph had commanded

We aren't told how it came to be that Simeon was chosen but Joseph had him bound in their presence and he sent the rest of them on their journey home with the grain they had come for

I'm fairly certain the brothers had some very strong ideas about Joseph based on their encounters with him

I'm sure they had some pretty interesting discussions about him during the three weeks it would have taken them to travel the roughly 250 miles home

They would have seen Joseph to be a harsh, unfeeling man who was out to punish them for a crime they hadn't committed

They had not recognized who Joseph truly was and they only saw him as the prime minister of Egypt who wielded the power of life and death over them

They also didn't see how Joseph wept when they confessed their sin against him as we are shown in verse 24 (**Genesis 42:24**)

And isn't that the way we sometimes think and feel about God when he has to correct some error in us?

We only feel his displeasure and his corrective hand and we miss the fact that God grieves at our misdeeds

I'll never forget the first time I had to spank my oldest daughter – I actually cried as much as she did

And although I don't think I cried each time, I do know that punishing them as a part of disciplining them was always as hard on me as it was on them

Why would we think it's any different with our Heavenly Father?

But, back to the brothers...

I want you to notice in verse 25 (**Genesis 42:25**) that Joseph orders that they be given not only the grain but that he also gives them provisions for their journey

That's a key element that we often overlook because it means that the brothers shouldn't have needed to look in their grain sacks until they arrived at home

And we also err when we visualize each brother carrying a single sack of grain back to Canaan

Jacob's extended family, which included workers, was quite large so the brothers needed to procure a very large amount of grain if they were to sustain the clan for any length of time at all –

Otherwise it wouldn't be worth a trip that took at a minimum six weeks to go back and forth

And that makes the discovery of the money in the mouth of one of the sacks while still on the road all the more unlikely and, therefore, God-directed

And the change that has been wrought in the brothers is evident as they acknowledge that God was behind it

While they don't understand the grace of God that Joseph showed to them for what it is at this time as their sacks of money are discovered over time God is preparing them for the big reveal that is still to come

## Conclusion

The fact that God has instilled within us a sense of conscience is a wonderful thing

However, it's also a fallible thing that can be desensitized and even put to sleep

And it's a pliable thing when we base it on anything other than the Word of God

One writer compared our conscience to a sundial that serves as a fairly accurate timepiece when it's fully illuminated by the sun but is totally unable to give any kind of time at night

We need to see God's Word and the work of the Holy Spirit as he uses God's Word in our lives as the sun shining on the sundial of our conscience because without that, we cannot rely on conscience as a certain guide

But still, we have the power to wrestle our conscience into submission and when we don't want to face up to its warnings that's typically what we do

We do something that is displeasing to God and our conscience begins to scold and correct us and we tamp it down

The next time our conscience speaks but not as loudly or as forcefully and the time after that it barely whispers and eventually it doesn't make a peep

And then God has to use other methods to try and get our attention

We need to understand that we haven't necessarily sinned every time we have something unpleasant happen to us

That's the mistake that Job's friends made when they accused him of some secret sin to explain why his tragedies had befallen him

And it's the mistake Jesus' disciples made when they asked him in **John 9:2** whether a man was born blind because of sins he or his parents had committed

Sometimes God allows trouble and discomfort in our lives for other reasons such as to teach us patience or to strengthen some aspect of our character

But it behooves us to honestly seek to find out if God is trying to awaken us to the knowledge of some wrongdoing and then to welcome and respond positively to his correction

Let's pray