

The Prosecutor Within

Genesis 42

Introduction – The Gift of a Sensitive Conscience

The government receives sums of money from people who have imposed fines upon themselves for stealing from the government. In one case, the person stole government blankets. Another knowingly did not put the correct postage on a letter. One lady, whose husband had died, realized he had cheated on his income tax the year before. She sent a check for five hundred dollars. The government, in 1811, created what they call, the Federal Conscience Fund. It now totals more than three million dollars – all from people who have made restitution.

I read a rather funny story of one man who decided that he would make restitution because he had cheated on his income tax. He wrote the government this letter, “I have stolen from the government by cheating on my income tax and I can’t sleep. I have enclosed a check for \$75. If I still can’t sleep, I’ll send you the rest of what I owe.”

What is it that sometimes points a finger at us? What is it that sometimes robs us of sleep at night?

George Washington called it, “The sparkle of celestial fire.”

Lord Byron referred to this inner struggle as, “The oracle of God.”

We are referring to it today as, “The prosecutor within.”

The purpose of this sermon today, is much more than just getting through another chapter in the book of Genesis. I trust that, as a result of this sermon, we will be more sensitive to our conscience as God speaks to us. Then, if there are things that need to be made right, today will be the time when that is done.

Three functions of our conscience

Let me give three things, before we dive into Genesis, chapter 42, about this gift that God has given us; that is, our conscience. Our conscience has a threefold function. There are probably more, but let me give three.

Distinguishes between right and wrong

1. First, the conscience – this gift from God; this inner oracle – distinguishes between right and wrong.

Now, the conscience is not always accurate. In fact, if you train it, it is like a circus dog. You can train it to roll over; you can train it to come when you whistle; you can train it to play dead. It is not completely accurate because it is dependent on how you condition it.

God, however, has given us the gift of conscience to distinguish between right and wrong. As a result, a little four-year-old boy, whether he is born in America, or in Africa, or in Australia, knows that when he lies to Mommy and Daddy, he has done something wrong.

We do not have to teach children how to lie, we have to discipline the liar out of them. Why is that? Because God has given them, and us, this distinguishing ability between what is right and what is wrong.

That is why it is so important, ladies and gentlemen, that we condition our conscience by the scriptures; that we allow the Bible to tell us what is right and what is wrong. Then, our consciences are not tuned to our culture, whose values change, our consciences are tuned to the scriptures, which never change.

Encourages doing what is right and discourages doing what is wrong

2. Secondly, another facet or function of the conscience is that it encourages doing what is right and discourages doing what is wrong.

That is why, young people, you might experience a struggle during mid-term examinations. If you are in Spanish class and you are like me, you are barely making it. Let us say that during the mid-term exam, you happen to sit next to the guy who is the smartest guy in the class. He is as good as bilingual and you

know that every answer he gives is going to be right. So, all of the sudden, you are facing a battle.

“Look! Look over there.”

You say, “No.”

“Yes!”

“No.”

“Yes!”

You are carrying on this conversation in your head. What is happening? You are, in a sense, carrying on an argument with your conscience. Your conscience is encouraging you to do what is right and to not look at someone’s answers. It is discouraging you from doing what is wrong, which your flesh is encouraging you to do. That inner struggle that you feel when you are tempted to do something that is wrong is a God-given struggle called, “conscience”.

Produces guilt when wrong is done

3. The third function is that the conscience produces guilt when wrong is done.

Again, men and women, it is very important that the Bible determine what is right and wrong. Our consciences can become so seared that we can do wrong and experience very little guilt. I am convinced that no matter how hardened an individual may be, he will always experience some sense of guilt, but he, and we, can play it down.

The first time you want to do something wrong in a particular area, your conscience shouts, “No!!”

The second time you want to do that wrong thing, a few days later, you say, “Now look, conscience, I understand why you shouted, “No,” but I didn’t tell you a reason or two of why I should.” And your conscience, after hearing the reasons, says, “No!”

So you come back the following week, and you say, “Now, I realize why you said, “No,” because of these particular reasons, but I’ve come up with a few more. Here are additional reasons and rational as to why I should do this (or say this or go there or whatever).” And your conscience says, “No.”

Then, at a later point in time, you give your conscience additional rational and you so justify it that now your conscience says in a whisper, “No.” But it is much easier to ignore a whisper than a shout. That is why it is so important that we allow our consciences to be transformed by the renewing of our minds through God’s Word.

Ways God Awakens a Sleeping Conscience

Now, the third function of the conscience, or the producing of guilt when wrong is done, is going to be seen in Genesis, chapter 42. So turn there in your Bible and we will see the awakening consciences of Joseph’s ten brothers.

For twenty-five years, Joseph’s brothers had battled their consciences. His brothers battled and fought to silence and to suppress the guilt that they had because of what they had done to Joseph. For twenty-five years, they had ignored what their consciences were shouting. They had not said anything to their father, Jacob. They had perhaps, never breathed it again to each other. They were living under tremendous, severe guilt.

Now prophecy tells us that these brothers will come to Egypt and establish a great nation. So in the valley of Goshen, this little, bitty nomadic tribe will turn into a fantastically huge nation – the nation of Israel. That cannot be done in Canaan, they need Goshen to support that kind of existence. God has planned that they do that in Egypt.

However, for the ten brothers, as well as Benjamin, the eleventh brother, and their father, Jacob, to come to Egypt, there must be a reconciliation with Joseph. For a reconciliation to take place, these brothers must admit their guilt. And for them to admit their guilt, their sleeping consciences must be awakened.

Three principles to awaken a guilty conscience

Now some have suggested that Joseph is incredibly hard on his brothers. But I think I will be able to show that he is doing nothing more than wisely awakening their suppressed guilty consciences. There are several principles that will do this.

The principle of association

1. The first is the principle of association.

Let me explain what I mean by this through looking at the first five verses of Genesis, chapter 42. Begin with verses 1 and 2.

Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, “Why are you staring at one another?” He said, “Behold, I have heard that there is grain in

Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die.”

This is very interesting because it proves that there has been guilt by association. They are starving. There is a famine in the land. And where can they get bread? Everyone knows – in Egypt.

There is an old proverb that says, “Never speak of rope in a hangman’s house.”

You never want to speak of Egypt to Joseph’s ten brothers. In fact, Egypt was something they never wanted to be confronted with. I would imagine, over the twenty-five year period, when anyone from Egypt was coming through needing lodging, the brothers probably just scuttled them right on past. They do not want anything to slip. Perhaps by some coincidence, the person knew Joseph.

So their father Jacob says, “We’re starving! Go to Egypt!”

The brothers probably cast furtive looks at each other – suspicious looks, as Reuben looks at Simeon. Egypt! I am sure terror gripped their souls. Go to Egypt! That is the last place on earth they want to go. All of the guilt begins to rise to the surface as they hear the dreaded name of the country where they sold their brother. Egypt.

Jacob says, “Quit staring at each other. What are you just looking at one another for? Go to Egypt.”

So, in verse 3,

Then ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt.

I cannot help but allow my imagination to join that caravan as they head to Egypt. I imagine, as they get closer, they see slave gangs working in the fields, and wonder, “Is Joseph there?”

As they get closer to Egypt, perhaps they see some slaves working at some menial task. They take a closer look, afraid they might discover that it is Joseph. They are petrified, as you will see later in the chapter.

Continue to the first part of verse 4, which is interesting.

But Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother Benjamin with his brothers . . .

Benjamin, you may remember, is the blood brother of Joseph. The other brothers are half brothers. Benjamin is a true son and he, evidently, received all of the love of Jacob that had once been

given to Joseph. So he was, obviously, pampered. He was, like Joseph, the son that Jacob was partial to.

Perhaps, by this time, Jacob has begun to mistrust his other sons. Perhaps, by now, he senses that there was mischief done, so he will not send Benjamin with them. He says, in the last part of verse 4,

. . . I am afraid that harm may befall him.

In verse 5, we then read,

So the sons of Israel came to buy grain among those who were coming, for the famine was in the land of Canaan also.

It is interesting, ladies and gentlemen, the way that God will use guilt by association in your life and in mine. There may be some holiday that brings to your mind terrible feelings of guilt because you have unconfessed sin. I am not talking about sin that you have confessed to Jesus Christ. That should no longer produce guilt. We are to forgive and we are to allow Christ to forgive us, and then forget it. But those things that we have held back, those things that we have harbored in our souls in rebellion – maybe some event, some vacation spot, some person’s name – when we hear it, our blood runs thick – we are guilty. That is why it is interesting to notice the way we can hear of certain things and feel so guilty.

I recently read a biographical sketch of Al Capone that was quite fascinating. Al Capone, as you may know, gunned down perhaps more than five hundred men in his days as a mob leader in this country. He was a vicious man who attached machine guns to the inside of his trunk. When he was being pursued by other gangsters or by the police, he could mechanically operate the guns from the inside of his car as he drove. He would push a button, the lid would fly open, and he would spray the car behind him with bullets. He and his gangsters often would “blow people away” as they were driving along the road. In his later years, this man became so obsessed; so paranoid, and one fascinating thing is that he was terrified of cars filled with men. Why? It was guilt by association.

Ladies and gentlemen, when we read in God’s Word of Peter denying Jesus Christ, what is God doing? God is, perhaps, confronting us with guilt by association. In other words, He is bringing to our minds that yesterday, in the hallway of that downtown business, someone asked us something about religion and we refused to say anything. We denied Him and then, felt guilty. Perhaps, there by the locker in

school, someone made some caustic remark about the Lord and you clamed up. So when you read of Peter, God is able to convict you by association.

The principle of circumstances

2. The second principle that Joseph will begin to use, wisely I think, to awaken his brother's guilty consciences, is what we will call the principle of similar circumstances.

I agree with the great expositor F. B. Meyer, as he talks of the way in which Joseph lays down, literally step-by-step, everything that his brothers had done to him. Joseph will parrot words that they once hurled at him; he will put them in the same situation that they had put him in. Why? Because he wants to sense and to see whether or not they have dealt with their guilt.

Let us look at this together. It is fascinating. Look at verse 6 of chapter 42.

Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.

It is interesting that in Genesis, chapter 37, verse 7, Joseph's dreams foretold that his brothers would bow down to him. The same Hebrew word is used in these two verses. Continue to verse 7a of chapter 42.

When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them . . .

Remember that Joseph is the prime minister now. He is wearing the Egyptian headband. He is clean shaven now, according to Egyptian custom, instead of wearing a full beard, as was the custom of the Hebrews. He looked anything other than a Hebrew. And we are told in the next phrase of verse 7 that he continued this acting by,

. . . and spoke to them harshly. . .

This is a similar circumstance. Notice in verse 4 of chapter 37, that the brothers could not speak peace to Joseph. The Hebrew word was "Shalom" – they could not say, "Shalom," to Joseph because they hated him so much. Every time he was around, they spoke harshly to him. Now Joseph is the one speaking harshly to them. He says, in the last part of verse 7,

. . . "Where have you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food."

Perhaps Joseph is in charge of all of the large purchases of food and that is why his brothers are before him. Continue to verses 8 and 9.

But Joseph had recognized his brothers, although they did not recognize him. Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them, and said to them, "You are spies; you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land."

Joseph will give his brothers exactly what they gave him – a false accusation. As we previously studied, they said, in a sense, "You're a dreamer. You've come to spy on us. Our father sent you along so you can spy."

You may remember that Joseph brought back a bad report of his brother's character to their father and they accused him of being a spy. I imagine he probably said, "No, no, guys, I'm not a spy! I'm your brother. I love you."

"No! You're a spy, sent by our father."

Now Joseph, interestingly, accuses them of the same thing. Look at verses 10 through 14.

Then they said to him, "No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man; we are honest men, your servants are not spies." Yet he said to them, "No, but you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land!" But they said, "Your servants are twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no longer alive." Joseph said to them, "It is as I said to you, you are spies; . . ."

In other words, not only does he falsely accuse them, but he refuses to listen to their pleas. That is exactly what they had done to him. Continue to verses 15 and 16.

"By this you will be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here! Send one of you that he may get your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. But if not, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies."

He is giving them several tests that we will study in our next discussion. This is one of them, it is a test of honor. He is going to discover whether they really care about their brother, as they will soon put Simeon in prison.

This is the principle of similar circumstances. God often works in our hearts in the same way. We are guilty of something and, for some reason, we suppress that guilt and ignore it until we see someone else in a very similar situation. We may have been guilty, perhaps of gossip, and we have ignored it or overlooked it until someone gossips to us or we are gossiped about. It is that similar circumstance that brings to our mind, by the grace of God, "I'm guilty of that."

George W. Truitt, a preacher of yesteryear, used to tell the story of a man who was accused of killing his employer. To hide the facts, the man burned his employer's home to the ground. He was on trial and the prosecutor and his defense attorney were doing their best. The trial went on for several weeks, with the judge presiding in that courtroom scene. Finally, the last remarks were made and then, it was the judge's turn to address the jury. The judge began to speak to the jury of this heinous crime that the man had been accused of. Then, to the shock of all in that packed courtroom, the judge buried his head in his hands and began to weep. He said, as he confessed to that entire courtroom, "I have been guilty, since thirty years ago, of killing my employer. To hide the evidence, I burned his home to the ground. I, for the last few weeks, have been judging my own crime."

Sometimes God can work in our lives to bring about an awakened conscience through similar circumstances.

The principle of isolation

3. There is a third principle to awaken a sleeping conscience that we will call the principle of isolation.

Note verse 17,

So he put them all together in prison for three days.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Joseph gives his brothers similar circumstances by speaking to them just as they had spoken to him. He gives them the same treatment and then, he throws them in prison – just as he was thrown in.

However, I think Joseph has something more in mind. By the wisdom that God had given him, he now puts his brothers into a place where all they have to do, for three days, is think. All they can do is just mull over in their minds, as their guilty consciences are coming awake due to returning to Egypt – the land of their brother that they had desperately tried to forget.

Now, Joseph's brothers are in a prison. I imagine they are casting furtive glances about the walls of the prison, seeing the names and messages that previous prisoners have etched into the wall, and wondering, "I wonder if Joseph's name is here. I wonder if this is where he was incarcerated."

These brothers are tormented, I think, as they have time to think for three days.

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the reasons why God cannot get to us, in terms of awakening our slumbering consciences of guilt, is we never allow Him the time; we never get alone. We get into a room and we have to flip the TV on, or turn the radio on, or get some noise going in there because we cannot stand to be by ourselves.

Shakespeare wrote, "To be alone with my conscience is hell enough for me."

When was the last time you were alone before God? Are you afraid to be, knowing that as soon as it is quiet, the Spirit of God will begin rumbling in your soul and bringing to mind things that you have never dealt with?

I am reading a book that someone gave me, entitled, *Restoring Your Mind in a Secular World*. It is impacting me. The first chapter begins with a quote by Chuck Colson. He says, "Although in America, religion is becoming popular, it is becoming faddish. Although today, religion is up, morality is down. Why?"

The book goes on to declare that believers who are very religious, who know the game, who know the language, are no longer spending time alone with God. As a result, God does not speak. Christians are living with the guilt of unconfessed sin.

Application – The Response of a Guilty Conscience

Now, as Joseph deals with his brothers, I want to move to the application, which is, the response of a

guilty conscience. This is tremendous. Let us take time to pull this apart.

Just the law of proportion would tell us that there is a lot in these few chapters. This is probably the story with the most specifics given to us in all the Bible. There is a reason for that. It is not just to be read and forgotten; it is not just an interesting story, it is to be applied.

There are several responses as we see these slumbering consciences come awake and bring with that, of course, pain.

An admission of guilt

1. The first response of a guilty conscience is an admission of guilt.

Look at verses 18 through 19a.

Now Joseph said to them on the third day, "Do this and live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; . . ."

In other words, this is the test, "I'm not going to keep ten of you and send one of you back; I'm just going to keep one of you."

We will look at why I think Joseph did this in our next discussion. Continue to verses 19b through 20a.

". . . but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, . . ."

Joseph is working toward a family reunion. Continue to the last part of verse 20.

". . . and you will not die." And they did so.

Note this scene. Joseph is standing in front with his ten brothers lined up before him, and in the middle is an interpreter. Joseph has been speaking in Egyptian – that has been part of his acting. He knows Hebrew fluently, but if he spoke Hebrew, they would perhaps, wonder. So he has been conversing to them through the interpreter in Egyptian. The brothers are beginning to speak now in Hebrew, not knowing he understands. Notice what they say, in verse 21.

Then they said to one another, "Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul . . ."

That prison has certainly done the job. Now they speak of all these other factors.

". . . when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us."

Circle the word "we" in your text, it is very emphatic in the original. In using this word, it is as if they smite their breasts and say, "*We, only we, are guilty. We have done this terrible crime.*"

It is interesting that when their backs are against the wall, they admit guilt. Judah does not say, "God has done this because I committed incest," as he had done. Simeon does not say, "God has done this because I massacred those helpless men years ago," as he had done. Reuben does not say, "God has done this to me because I have slept with my father's wife," as he had done. No. The thing in all of their minds that brought tremendous guilt was, "God is doing this because of what we did to our brother, Joseph. We saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us."

Can you imagine the scene as Joseph is being chained in that chain gang along with the other slaves headed for Egypt? His hands are cuffed and he turns back to his brothers and says, "Reuben, Simeon, don't do this. Don't let them take me!" And he cries until his cry is no longer heard.

Verse 21b says,

. . . we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us.

It is so true that when you do something to someone else, you bear the distress. There is something about the way God has made us that we actually become the victim when we mistreat; when we sin against others. There is a transfer of guilt.

An escape by self-defense

2. The second response of a guilty conscience is an escape by self-defense.

Look at verse 22.

Reuben answered them, saying, . . .

In other words, Reuben kind of pulls away from the crowd and says, "Hey, wait a second, brothers."

"Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin against the boy';" . . .

What a lousy thing to say. He is as guilty as they are, and he says, "Didn't I tell you so? Didn't I tell you this would happen. I told you not to do anything against this boy and you did it."

“. . . and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood.”

Reuben was as guilty as sin. He was right in there with the rest of them for twenty-five years. He had never gone to his father; had never taken a trip to Egypt to try to rescue Joseph. And now, he is self-righteous? “Huh, me? Guilty? No way!”

When God brings to our mind things by way of an awakened conscience, we can admit guilt and say, “Lord, it is because I have sinned,” or we can say, “Wait a second, you don’t know who you’re talking to. I’m religious. I’m a Christian.”

An understanding of God’s involvement

3. The third response of a guilty conscience, and this is beautiful, is an understanding of God’s involvement.

Note verses 23 through 24a.

They did not know, however, that Joseph understood . . . He turned away from them and wept. . . .

I cannot imagine being Joseph, hearing these nine brothers weep that this was being done because of what they had done to him. It brought back to him all of the emotion of that day twenty-five years before when he saw his brothers desert and abandon him. He has to turn away and just weep. Perhaps he rushes from the room. Finally, in verse 24b,

. . . he returned to them and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes.

That is another similar circumstance.

Continue to verse 25.

Then Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain and to restore every man’s money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. . . .

We will study this further in our next discussion. Skip to verse 28, as one of the brothers discovers the contents of his sack.

Then he said to his brothers, “My money has been returned, and behold, it is even in my sack.” And their hearts sank, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, “What is this that God has done to us?”

Note that last statement. One of the responses that God, I think, wants to bring us to, as He brings to

our minds that guilty conscience that we have been suppressing, is that *He* is involved in our lives. He wants us to realize that He is even bringing about these events to bring us to Himself for cleansing and forgiveness. These brothers finally say, “God is doing something. There are too many coincidences here. Something is happening. It must be God.”

One of the responses of a guilty conscience is an understanding that we are accountable to God. Ultimately, the brothers understood that it was God who was behind the scenes.

Perhaps something has come to your mind that has been brought to your remembrance by the Spirit of God. You might be thinking, “I am guilty of certain things that I have been struggling with and rebelling against and hanging on to. What should I do? I don’t want to go through another chapter and a half until this thing is figured out.”

The Bible is very clear. We are to specifically confess, immediately forsake, and whole-heartedly claim the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Some of you may need to make restitution as well. Some of you may need to request forgiveness from another.

My parents have been missionaries for more than thirty years with servicemen. My brothers and I grew up in downtown Norfolk, Virginia, where there was a servicemen’s center. Running down the streets, we would go down there after school and all summer long. Back then, the streets were fairly safe, so we could do that. There was also a wharf and we would play on the rocks and go in and out of every store. We would ransack the hallways of the MacArthur Memorial that was there, nearly every week, and the library as well.

The servicemen’s center eventually moved out of its one room shop into a three-story building that was a block long. It was a very large servicemen’s center, which they now no longer use. We would play for hours on end, all of the missionary kids, because that is where our parents spent most of their time. We had a ball! We had three stories all to ourselves. We would climb out on the roof and do all sorts of things. On the third floor there was a washing machine and a dryer for the servicemen. The sailors at that time, wore the whites and the darks and that funny little hat that they wore.

Now, I will tell you why I am remembering this. It is because of something I had forgotten. One of the missionary kids, named Bobby Walker, and I were the closest buddies until we graduated from high school.

We then went our separate ways. He went to a local university and I went off to college. Bobby was a rascal and was responsible for anything wrong that I did! We used to hang around together.

My father recently got a letter from Bobby Walker, now referred to as Bob. Bobby wrote in his letter, "You know, God has been working in my heart."

Bob is a thirty-two year old man. He now directs the largest Christian ranch in Virginia. I did not know that until a few weeks ago.

Bobby said, "When I was a kid and we were running around Missions to Military, I'd go up to the third floor and I'd take a piece of bubble gum and stick it on the end of a popsicle stick. I'd slip that stick down in the money box and I'd pull money out."

I cannot remember doing that with Bobby. Maybe that is a suppressed conscience, I don't know. But God had brought that to his mind.

He said, "I can remember doing that on several occasions. I have no idea how much I took, but here's twenty dollars. I think that will cover it."

Bob is, of course, working with teenagers and young people, as well as couples. He is evidently seeing, week after week, the importance, the necessity of a clean, clear conscience.

One of the greatest gifts God has given us is a conscience. We can turn it off; we can shout it down; we can ignore it. Or, we can, by God's Word, allow God to speak through it so that it is, in fact, the oracle of God.

Do not go another day with a guilty conscience. Experience the joy and the cleansing of a conscience that is clear and clean before God.