

# Consciences Stirred


 JOSEPH


*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.*

Genesis 42:21



## DEVOTIONAL

Joseph, a true believer in God and heir of the Abrahamic covenant, knew the Lord's people first had to go into Egypt so that Yahweh could rescue them and bring them to the Promised Land (Genesis 15:12–21; 50:24). Joseph also knew God's people must be sons of the Spirit and not sons according to the flesh alone (Galatians 3:1–9). His brothers' past actions rendered the sincerity of their faith questionable (Genesis 37–38), but Joseph also knew that penitent sinners are sons of the Spirit (Luke 15:10; 2 Corinthians 7:5–16). He would bring his brothers into Egypt if they demonstrated that they were the Lord's holy people by showing remorse for their evil.

Joseph's accusations and imprisonment of his brothers are a test to see if they are now his spiritual kin. This testing comes about indirectly, for if it were obvious that Joseph was their tester, any godliness they manifested might only be for show. Joseph must see if they will repent for the right reasons; thus, he incarcerated his brothers to help them come clean regarding their sins against him (Genesis 42:17).

According to today's passage, Joseph's ploy succeeded. His brothers see that their deeds have been evil, for they feel divine retribution in prison (v. 21). As often happens when we are convicted, the Holy Spirit has used outward means of discipline while stirring the brothers' conscience. John Calvin comments: "God, in order to lead the sons of Jacob to repentance, impelled them, as well by the secret instinct of his Spirit as by outward chastisement, to become sensible of that sin which had been too long concealed."

Our Lord will use any means necessary to provoke His people to repentance and keep them in the faith. That is why the proper administration of church discipline is so important. Our Father often works through such outward means to accomplish the purification of our souls, and so we must not fear the discipline of His body (1 Corinthians 5). Church leaders can do much to encourage their congregations to receive church discipline – if they follow the example of Joseph and make it clear that discipline comes from a compassionate desire to see restoration (Genesis 42:24; Matthew 18:15–20).

## CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)

Scripture is clear that church discipline is not to be carried out with the aim of vengeance. Instead, restoration must be the aim, and a disciplined person is to be forgiven when he repents (2 Corinthians 2:5–11). All Christians are to be involved in church discipline, whether privately, or in worst-case scenarios, publicly before the elders (Matthew 18:15–20). If you must rebuke a brother in Christ, make it clear that you seek his repentance and restoration.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/consciences-stirred/>



### OPEN IT

1. When have you gotten away with doing something bad but struggled with the guilt of wrongdoing? What made you finally come clean about it? What was your punishment?



### READ IT

Genesis 42



### EXPLORE IT

2. Why does Jacob send his sons to Egypt?
3. Upon their entrance into Joseph's court, what do the brothers do?
4. What does Joseph accuse them of being?
5. What does Joseph require of his brothers to prove the validity of their story?
6. What caused Jacob and his sons to be afraid at the end of the chapter?



### APPLY IT

#### How the conscience is seared

In Genesis 42, God is awakening the sleeping consciences of Joseph's brothers. They were a hard bunch. Years before, under the leadership of Simeon and Levi, they had deceived a village, slaughtered all the men and taken the women and children captive in retaliation for one man's violating their sister. Reuben, the oldest, had slept with his father's concubine. Judah had two sons so wicked that the Lord took their lives. He himself had gone in to his daughter-in-law, Tamar, thinking her to be a prostitute. All of the brothers, except Benjamin, had sold Joseph into slavery and then crushed their father's heart by deceiving him into thinking that his son was dead.

Now it's 22 years later. They've papered over their guilty consciences. Joseph was out of sight, out of mind. Life in Canaan was comfortable, although they were blending in with the paganism around them. To awaken the consciences of a tough bunch like this, God has to use some rather severe measures. The famine in Egypt extends into Canaan. Slowly their supply of grain dwindles to nothing. They're facing starvation. Jacob hears that there is grain in Egypt, so he sends his ten sons (minus Benjamin) down there to buy grain.

In the process, their sleeping consciences awake. Their story shows us how God uses severity and grace to awaken our consciences and bring us to repentance.<sup>2</sup>

7. Imagine for a moment that you are one of the brothers during those 22 years. What range of emotions might you have experienced?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. What can we learn from the fact that the truth was never divulged? What does this tell us about the human condition?

The conscience is an odd thing. *It's the moral barometer of the heart that senses when we've done wrong.* Everyone has one. It's not a matter of religion or education or geography or ethnic origin. If you're a member of the human family, you were born with a conscience. It's part of God's original design. You get a conscience by virtue of being born on planet earth.<sup>3</sup>

9. Describe in your own words what the conscience is. How does it shape one's life and decisions?

"The conscience, however, is not infallible. Nor is it the source of revelation about right and wrong. Its role is not to teach us moral and ethical ideals, but to hold us accountable to the highest standards of right and wrong we know."<sup>4</sup>

10. There is an old adage that says, "Let your conscience be your guide." Is there any value in such advice? How might a steady diet of God's Word bring benefit and clarity to one's use of his conscience?

### **How the conscience is stirred**

Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, so he started talking it up with his sons. But every time he brought up the subject, none of his sons would look him in the eye. They just stared at one another. Reuben looked at Simeon, Simeon glanced at Judah, Judah's eyes darted over to Levi. Jacob said, "Why are you staring at one another. Get down to Egypt and buy us some grain." For Jacob, Egypt was a neutral word. But for his sons, the word Egypt went off like a bomb in their guilty consciences. They could hear again the clink of the silver coins they received from the traders as they sold their brother into slavery. They could see him begging for his life as he was being dragged off. They remembered the terrible expression of horror on his face. Egypt! Donald Barnhouse says, "The word *Egypt* in their ears must have sounded like the word *rope* in the house of a man who has hanged himself" (*Genesis* [Zondervan], 2:187).

All this time they had promoted the lie that Joseph was dead. They had said it so many times that it just rolled off their lips. When they unknowingly talk to Joseph they say, "... we are honest men, ... twelve

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<sup>2</sup> Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <http://media.sermonaudio.com/mediapdf/99225162257351.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Sermon by Ray Pritchard found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/are-you-willing-to-face-your-past/>

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, J., F., Jr. (1994). *The Vanishing Conscience* (Electronic ed.). Logos Library Systems. Dallas: Word Pub.



