

“THE LORD AWAKENS CONSCIENCES”

I. Introduction

- A. In Psalm 32, King David recounts how miserable he was when he kept silent about his sin.
1. David says that his bones were wasting away, that he groaned all day long, and that God’s hand was heavy upon him.
 2. In saying these things, David presents a picture of a conscience being tormented under the convicting hand of God.
 3. We find similar pictures in the novels *The Scarlett Letter* and *Crime and Punishment*.
 4. Both stories feature characters who commit grave sins and whose consciences are wracked with guilt as they try to hide what they have done.
 5. In *The Scarlett Letter*, the torment of conscience is experienced by a minister who has committed adultery with a woman in his town.
 6. In *Crime and Punishment*, it is experienced by a student who has murdered an old woman.
 7. As with David in Psalm 32, it was only when these men acknowledged and repented of their sins that their consciences were finally set free, though they still faced earthly consequences for their sins.
 8. These examples show us that, while our impulse is to hide, excuse, or minimize our sin, it is only by bringing sin into the light that the misery of our guilt can be taken away.

- B. Genesis 42 tells us how the Lord awakened the consciences of Joseph's brothers.
 - 1. Twenty years had passed since the brothers had conspired to get rid of Joseph.
 - 2. And it seemed to them that they had gotten away with it.
 - 3. Their father may have developed some suspicions about what really happened, but the brothers stuck to their story.
 - 4. To do this, they had to suppress their feelings of guilt and rationalize what they had done.
 - 5. But as we see in today's text, the Lord did not let them forget about their sin.
 - 6. By bringing troubling circumstances upon them, he caused their consciences to be troubled.
 - 7. While this was not a pleasant experience for them, God had a gracious purpose in it.
 - 8. He was awakening their consciences so that he could work repentance in their hearts.

II. Troubling Circumstances (1-20)

- A. Our passage begins with Jacob and his family suffering under the famine that the Lord had predicted through Pharaoh's dreams.
 - 1. The brothers are just sitting around looking at each other, apparently paralyzed with despair over their desperate situation.
 - 2. Then Jacob stands up and rebukes his sons.

3. He tells them to go to Egypt, where he has heard that there is grain for sale.
 4. The mention of Egypt would have pricked the brothers' consciences, reminding them of what they had done to Joseph.
 5. And we should note that the reason why Egypt alone had grain was because of the implementation of the policy that the Lord had caused Joseph to recommend to Pharaoh.
 6. As we noted last week, in bringing this famine upon the covenant family and then drawing them to Egypt, the Lord was continuing to carry out his gracious work in their lives.
 7. Had Jacob's family not felt the threat of starvation, the brothers never would have gone to Egypt, they never would have come into contact with Joseph, and they never would have been awakened to feel the guilt of their sin.
 8. We can't produce repentance in our hearts.
 9. It is the work of God's grace. (see Acts 11:18)
- B. As Jacob sends his sons away, he does not send Benjamin with them.
1. Benjamin was Jacob's only other son through his beloved wife Rachel.
 2. Rachel's first son was Joseph, and as far as Jacob knew Joseph was long dead.
 3. Jacob was not about to let Benjamin make the trip to Egypt with his brothers, lest he lose him as well.
 4. This may imply that Jacob had come to suspect that the brothers had something to do with the tragedy that befell Joseph.

5. He doesn't trust that they will keep Benjamin safe.
 6. They were certainly not worthy of his trust.
 7. Their mistreatment of Joseph and their deception of their father demonstrated how heartless and selfish they were.
 8. But in the following chapters, their treatment of both Benjamin and their father will attest to the change the Lord works in their hearts through what transpires while they are in Egypt.
- C. When the brothers arrive in Egypt, they are brought before Joseph, who is overseeing the sale of grain.
1. Though the brothers do not recognize Joseph, he recognizes them.
 2. And when he sees them bowing before him with their faces to the ground, he remembers his dreams.
 3. He realizes that the Lord is finally bringing to pass what he had showed him those many years before.
- D. One of the questions raised by this text is why Joseph treated his brothers so harshly.
1. The fact that he is moved to tears in verse 24 suggests that his motive is something other than revenge.
 2. His heart goes out to them as he sees them going through this ordeal.
 3. The brothers are made to endure a small taste of the kind of treatment that Joseph had endured in Egypt.
 4. They are falsely accused, just as Joseph had been falsely accused by Potiphar's wife.

5. The brothers are also imprisoned, just as Joseph was.
 6. As we have seen, the Lord used Joseph's troubling circumstances to accomplish his good purposes in Joseph's life.
 7. God is about do the same thing in the lives of Joseph's brothers.
- E. Another thing that indicates that Joseph is not after revenge is the fact that he ends up dealing with his brothers much more leniently than he originally says.
1. At first, he tells them that one brother will have to go back and retrieve Benjamin while the rest remain behind.
 2. But after three days of imprisonment, he lets all but one of them return home.
 3. This stands in sharp contrast to how the brothers dealt with Joseph twenty years earlier.
 4. Joseph had begged his brothers for mercy, as they themselves recount in verse 21, but they did not show him any mercy.
 5. Now that the tables are turned, Joseph shows them a degree of mercy.
 6. He wants to see what effect this will have upon them.
 7. Will they see that he is treating them better than they had treated their own brother?
 8. Will they feel any remorse over what they have done?

III. Troubled Consciences (21-38)

- A. The brothers' responses show that Joseph's test is having its intended effect.
 - 1. Consciences that had been deadened for twenty years started to come alive.
 - 2. This is evident by the change that comes over them as they interact with Joseph.
 - 3. When Joseph first accuses them of being spies, they say, "We are honest men."
 - 4. Honest men?
 - 5. Who do they think they are kidding?
 - 6. They dealt treacherously with their own brother and then lied to their father about it.
 - 7. And they kept that lie alive for two decades, even as they saw their father mourning so inconsolably.

- B. But we see a change in the brothers after Joseph decides to give them a chance to prove that they really are being honest with him.
 - 1. As they confer with one another, they admit that they sinned against Joseph.
 - 2. They say, "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."
 - 3. They admit that they brought distress upon their brother's soul, and they realize that the Lord is paying them back for it.

4. It is true that Joseph's accusation that they were spies was false, but the brothers do not get hung up on that.
 5. They do not cite any technicalities to cover their guilt.
 6. They know that they are getting what they deserve.
 7. This is the kind of response that is produced in us when God awakens our consciences.
 8. We stop making excuses.
 9. We stop crying foul.
 10. We humble ourselves and submit to God's hand of discipline.
- C. Sometimes, people's consciences are awakened for a time only to have it eventually go back to sleep.
1. God did not let this happen to Joseph's brothers.
 2. He kept after them as they made their way home.
 3. For one thing, the return home itself would have reminded them of what they had done twenty years ago.
 4. Once again, they are traveling back to their father to explain why one of them is missing.
 5. Memories of Jacob's devastated response to their lie would have kept haunting them as they drew nearer and nearer to their home.
- D. Then there is the matter of the money in their sacks.
1. The brothers are greatly troubled at this, and with good reason.

2. They had sworn to Joseph that they were honest men.
 3. But here they are, leaving Egypt with grain that they did not pay for.
 4. They know that this had to be some sort of a mistake, but there is no telling whether Joseph will accept that explanation.
 5. How can they go back for Simeon when they will have to explain why they didn't pay for the grain?
 6. They are trapped.
 7. And note how they respond to this.
 8. They say, "What is this that *God* has done to us?"
 9. Once again, they realize that they are getting what their sins deserve.
- E. There is one other way in which the Lord does not let the brothers' consciences go back to sleep.
1. Even though Jacob refuses to send Benjamin back with them, the brothers are not going to be able to get Egypt out of their minds.
 2. Day by day, as their supply of grain is used up, they are reminded that they are going to have to go back.
 3. They are going to have to face up to that man in Egypt who had treated them so harshly when they first arrived there.
 4. They are going to have to explain why they failed to pay for the grain they obtained on their first visit.

5. God is at work in their hearts, and he is not going to let their awakened consciences fall back to sleep.
- F. This situation was also a test for Jacob.
1. After all, it was his favoritism that started this mess in the first place.
 2. If he had not treated Joseph as his favorite, his other sons would not have been led by their jealousy to get rid of Joseph.
 3. Has Jacob changed?
 4. Will he let his favoritism bring further harm to his family?
 5. Will he send Benjamin, his only other son by Rachel, so that his other sons can be vindicated and Simeon set free?
 6. He will not — at least not yet.
 7. For the present, he can only think of the sorrow he would feel if he lost Benjamin too.
 8. The Lord still has work to do in Jacob's life.
 9. This reminds us that our sanctification is never complete in this life.
 10. Even into old age, we need to put off the the old self with its practices and put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

IV. Conclusion

- A. This passage teaches us that, when believers have unresolved guilt in our lives, God will bring it to light so he can deal with it and continue his gracious work in us.

- B. God uses troubling circumstances to trouble our consciences.
- C. This is one of the ways he works repentance in our hearts.
- D. Whenever your conscience is awakened to see the corruption of your heart, don't try to lull it back to sleep by making excuses or by telling yourself that you will somehow make up for your sin.
- E. Instead, follow this counsel given by the Puritan Richard Sibbes: "If you find your conscience at all wounded with any sin, do not hold back from God any longer. Come and yield, lay down your weapons; there is mercy ready. The Lord is glorious in his mercy in Jesus Christ. It is a victorious triumphing mercy over all sin and unworthiness whatever." [*Glorious Freedom*, 82]
- F. When we are made to feel the weight of our guilt, we are reminded why we need to place all of our hope in Jesus Christ alone for our salvation.
- G. And when our trust is firmly fixed upon him, we see all the more clearly how great a blessing it is to be one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered, and against whom the LORD counts no iniquity.