

## Conviction

The human soul has an alarm system, and it called the conscience. The conscience is just like those sensors mounted on the wall. You can set them high or low, very sensitive or less so. But once triggered, they go off. So the conscience in a human watches all we do and say. The conscience can be adjusted. It can be made more sensitive or less sensitive. It can become seared, warped, or too sensitive. But when it goes off, it accuses us, like an alarm, telling us that we have transgressed, crossed a line, done wrong.

*their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) (Rom 2:15)*

The conscience is not meant to be ignored, or silenced. If conscience has been properly informed by the light of Scripture, it is a guide to protect us from sin, and to lead us to forgiveness when we have sinned.

In this chapter, we will come back to ten men, whose consciences were guilty. Perhaps they had silenced the alarm, but now the Holy Spirit, through Joseph, was going to fix that siren. The conscience may be uncomfortable, but it is a loving thing for God to give us one.

Let's begin by seeing how God brought this about.

*53 Then the seven years of plenty which were in the land of Egypt ended, 54 and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. The famine was in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread.*

*55 So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Then Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, do." 56 The famine was over all the face of the earth, and Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians. And the famine became severe in the land of Egypt. 57 So all countries came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine was severe in all lands.*

*When Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, Jacob said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" 2 And he said, "Indeed I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down to that place and buy for us there, that we may live and not die."*

Joseph's prediction of Pharaoh's dreams comes true. And think for a moment of the power of God over this whole scene. Egypt is largely watered from the Nile. The Nile finds its source in Lake Victoria. Where is that? Between Uganda and Tanzania. We know theoretically that God is controlling the weather, but to realise the specifics sometimes makes that abstract thought more concrete. For fourteen years, God specifically directed the weather patterns over central Africa to bring about a situation in Egypt. And indeed, through His governance of this situation, Egypt is now going to become pivotal for the whole area in the Middle East which is suffering under this famine. All lands slowly begin to hear that the only place where there is still food is Egypt. Including those in Canaan – including Jacob and his sons.

And so now, twenty years later, we come back to these men. God is providentially working in their lives. In fact, all the work in Joseph's life is going to turn out to be a work in their lives. They don't know it yet. All they know is that the weather is destroying crops. All they know, from speaking to people on the trade routes, is that Egypt has food. But God is working to bring these men to repentance, to life, to safety. He is going to make them true fathers of the tribes of Israel, and prepare that whole nation to become strong and set apart.

Jacob tells his sons to stop being passive and to go to the only place that has grain – Egypt. And we wonder if the very mention of that word, began to evoke guilt feelings in these men, who had for twenty years tried to forget. They know that Egypt was where they sold Joseph twenty years ago.

*3 So Joseph's ten brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. 4 But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "Lest some calamity befall him." 5 And the sons of Israel went to buy grain among those who journeyed, for the famine was in the land of Canaan.*

Now consider what it will mean for these ten brothers as they make their way down to Egypt. And as they made their way down to Egypt, undoubtedly they took the main routes used by the trade caravans, and saw other slaves being taken into Egypt, and they probably tried to drown out the memory of Joseph's voice pleading with them to take him out of the pit. Seeing men in irons, being whipped, treated like pack animals, what they had actually done to Joseph became more and more real.

As they arrived in Egypt, one of the sights that must have repeated itself before their eyes were slaves labouring: some in gravel pits, some making bricks, some hauling stone, always exposed to the baking sun, always watched and goaded on with a whip. And the brothers probably were terrified that in one of the work-gangs they would spot Joseph. But perhaps they told themselves, "He can't still be alive. Slaves under these conditions can't live long. He can't still be living in pain." But how the look on every slave's face must have haunted them. I am sure more than anything, they wanted to buy grain and get out of there as quickly as possible.

But it was not to be. Undoubtedly the many hundreds, if not thousands of foreigners who were in Egypt to buy grain had to go through some administrative process. They were buying it from the Egyptian government, and the one overseeing it all was Joseph.

*6 Now Joseph was governor over the land; and it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the earth. 7 Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them. Then he said to them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan to buy food." 8 So Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.*

Now why does Joseph recognise them, and they do not recognise him? Well first, it was easy to recognise a group of ten men, all bearded and dressed as shepherds from Canaan. They would have stood out for their appearance and as a group. They would have changed, but still quite recognisable from what Joseph remembered.

On the other hand, when they sold Joseph, he was seventeen. He was thirty when he stood before Pharaoh, and seven years of plenty have already passed. A man can change significantly in appearance from seventeen to thirty-seven. I'm sure there are people who you knew, but you would walk past them on the street and not recognise them if you have not seen them in twenty years. But also, remember Joseph's appearance. He is dressed in the linen uniform of a high Egyptian official. He is clean shaven with a shaven head, and probably with some Egyptian headdress. He wears jewellery, and his face was probably adorned with some of the cosmetics which were used by the Pharaohs and their high nobles. With twenty years of age, significant face paint, all the garb of Egyptian royalty, added to the fact that he was speaking fluent Egyptian and altered his voice somewhat, there was little chance of their recognising him.

This foreshadows someone else unknown and unrecognised by his brethren, even though he is the King. Jesus today is unrecognised by the Jews, though He knows them. In fact, like Joseph's brothers think he is dead, that's what the Jewish people think of Jesus – that some of their ancestors put him to death, and He is now dead.

Joseph has probably thought many times over the years what he would do if he encountered these men again. And now that he sees them, he personally takes on their case, so as to put his plan into

motion.

*9 Then Joseph remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them, and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see the nakedness of the land!"*

*10 And they said to him, "No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. 11 "We are all one man's sons; we are honest men; your servants are not spies." 12 But he said to them, "No, but you have come to see the nakedness of the land." 13 And they said, "Your servants are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and in fact, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more."*

*14 But Joseph said to them, "It is as I spoke to you, saying, 'You are spies!'"*

What is Joseph doing? Isn't he being harsh and unkind?

Well, in the first place, let me remind you of who these men were, and what kind of men they were when Joseph last saw them. These were men who butchered an entire town, murdering the inhabitants through deceit. These were immoral men, committing acts of immorality without repentance. These were cruel men, who threw their brother into a pit, and then sat down to eat lunch while he was there. These were callous men, who sold their brother into slavery. And above all, these men were deceitful, lying to their father about Joseph's fate. These are not the sort of men you need to use velvet gloves with.

But in the second place, Joseph has a plan in mind. He knows God has brought this about. As they bow before him he remembers his dreams, and he knows it is being fulfilled before his very eyes. God has done it – God sent him into Egypt, God used their evil, God exalted Joseph, God caused the famine, and here it is happening, though he knows it, and they do not.

So why doesn't he just reveal himself then and there? Joseph knows that kind of revelation would not be a real re-union with reconciliation. It would be premature and artificial because of his position of power. If he simply reveals himself as Joseph, they will cower in the dust, and loudly say they were sorry for what they did, but only out of fear for their lives. He needs to have a way to find out if they are repentant for their sin twenty years earlier without them feeling coerced or forced into any kind of confession.

That means the conscience has to be awoken. So Joseph begins a five-part plan to awaken the conscience of these men, to find out if they are still the callous, cruel, deceitful men they were twenty years ago.

The first thing Joseph does is to accuse them of something they no doubt had accused him of. He says to them, "You are spies, here to see what Egypt is about, and return to tell your masters" Now we remember back in chapter 37 that Joseph had seen his brothers do something evil, and had returned an evil report to Jacob. So what do siblings begin to call the sibling that tells on them? The rat, the tattle-tale, the spy. We can easily imagine that when Joseph found them in Dothan, the first thing they said to him was "Hello dreamer! Did Father send you to spy on us? Are you going to run back and tell him what we're doing?"

Sometimes the conscience is awoken when an accusation is made, sometimes of us, but sometimes of another, but it awakens in us a memory of how we have treated someone else. We hear of someone else's moral fall, but it convicts us of our own sin. We point out a sin in our children's lives and as the words are coming out of our mouths, we know it is true of us too. The conscience is stirring.

The second thing Joseph does is he accuses them of deception. He knows they are not spies, but by accusing them of having a deceitful motive, he stirs the conscience. Because nothing makes a liar so angry as to be accused of lying when he is for once telling the truth. And in verse 11, we read them saying *11 "We are all one man's sons; we are honest men; your servants are not spies."*

And at that statement, “we are honest men” we should all burst our laughing. This is one of the most deceitful families in all of Scripture, and their assessment of themselves is “we are honest men.” Now it happens that they are being honest about why they are there. But they have not been honest men. To that very day, they have not admitted to their father that it was they who sold Joseph into slavery.

So three times, Joseph denies their claims, and calls them deceivers. Look at their protests. Deceitful men become very emphatic when they are actually telling the truth. *13 And they said, "Your servants are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and in fact, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more."* And with each objection, they release more information, revealing what Joseph wanted to know – Jacob is still alive, and so is Benjamin. So Joseph now does a third thing.

*15 "In this manner you shall be tested: By the life of Pharaoh, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. 16 "Send one of you, and let him bring your brother; and you shall be kept in prison, that your words may be tested to see whether there is any truth in you; or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies!" 17 So he put them all together in prison three days.*

Joseph's third way of evoking their conscience is to give them a small taste of what they put Joseph through. They are going to become captive in a foreign land. They have no way out. Another person more powerful than they has simply dominated them and unfairly incarcerated them. For those three days, they are experiencing bondage. For three days, they hear the rough and coarse voices of people speaking in a foreign language. Everything is unfamiliar, everything brings fear. They have no way out, no recourse, no understanding. Who knows if they will ever get out? How can they even let their father Jacob know that they are down here in Egypt, held against their will? And in the quiet of that cell, for three days, each of those men must have begun to say in his heart: this is what it was like for our little brother Joseph, when he was only seventeen.

Now Joseph is not being evil. Three days in a prison, where they were safe, and fed, was little more than giving them a brief taste of what he went through for eight years. He does not intend to torture them. He wants to see if their consciences have hardened over these years or softened. So he has a fourth thing he will do, which is the most important thing of all.

*18 Then Joseph said to them the third day, "Do this and live, for I fear God: 19 "If you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined to your prison house; but you, go and carry grain for the famine of your houses. 20 "And bring your youngest brother to me; so your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they did so.*

Joseph says, “Let's find out if you are making this up or not. Go and fetch this supposed younger brother of yours, with one of you remaining behind as a hostage. If you come back with him, you can have this brother back, and it will vindicate you.”

Now Joseph knows that they have a younger brother, and he no doubt knows why Jacob didn't let him come. He knows this will be a sore trial for his father. But what Joseph has to see in front of him, is how the brothers are going to treat the youngest. Benjamin has taken Joseph's place as Jacob's most prized son. He is the youngest. Joseph wants to see if they treat Benjamin with resentment, scorn, and spite. For if they do, then he knows that they have not repented, and are still the same men. So what we will see in chapter 43 and 44 is an elaborate plan to recreate the situation of the favoured youngest son, to see how the others will treat him.

But even to this very point, it is clear that their consciences are deeply bothering them. As Joseph

gives this command, the combination of all the events of the past days, causes them to say this to one another in Hebrew:

*21 Then they said to one another, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us." 22 And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not speak to you, saying, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us."*

*23 But they did not know that Joseph understood them, for he spoke to them through an interpreter.*

*24 And he turned himself away from them and wept. Then he returned to them again, and talked with them.*

Now see how the conscience is waking up and afflicting them. Simply being in Egypt, seeing what they put him through, experiencing jail, being called liars, using words they had used on him, they are feeling accused. And notice Scripture does not say which of them said what. In verse 21, it is as if all of them are feeling, this all has to do with Joseph. He pleaded with us from that pit, and we hardened our hearts, and now it is all coming back to us. We are going through what he went through." Reuben tries to partly exonerate himself. "Remember, I told you not to harm him! Now like Abel's blood was required of Cain, so now we are going to pay for his death."

They're speaking in Hebrew, not knowing that Joseph can understand them, but Joseph is hearing them confess their guilt, and express remorse. And once Joseph begins to see the early fruit of repentance, his heart is soft, and touched, and he quickly goes away and weeps. The pain of having been abused, but now seeing the anguish of soul that his abusers are in is a double pain. It is a grief to not only know what someone took from you in harming you, but then to know how that person harmed himself or herself. The mixed feeling of facing these men, who owe him so much, but now to see how their sin has been a burden on their backs for twenty years. Joseph has indeed suffered, but we wonder who suffered more – Joseph in prison with a clean conscience, or these ten men, wondering the wide expanses of Canaan, but shackled to an accusing conscience.

And I suggest to you that this foreshadows that God will deal harshly with Israel. From the time of Christ, Jesus has been the cornerstone that the builders rejected and the Jewish people stumble over him. They have a sense that Jesus is at the root of all their troubles and problems. And though no Christian should ever use words like Christ-killers or add to the evil persecution of the Jewish people, yet deep in the collective conscience of the Jewish people is the sense that perhaps all this has come upon us because of our brother Jesus.

*And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. 25 Then Joseph gave a command to fill their sacks with grain, to restore every man's money to his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. Thus he did for them. 26 So they loaded their donkeys with the grain and departed from there.*

So he binds Simeon, the next eldest after Reuben, perhaps acknowledging that Reuben did try to save him. And then Joseph does a fifth thing to evoke their conscience. He secretly returns their money. Now I think he does this for two reasons. First, he is simply blessing them, making sure they have actually gotten their food for free, so that they will have more when they come back. He is making sure their households do well. Second, he is seeing if they will be honest enough to confess. Rather like when you buy something and the cashier over-changes you and gives you back more than you paid. One response is to smile and count yourself lucky that day, another is to tell the cashier that she gave you too much money. So Joseph is going to test if their hearts are still covetous and deceptive, or if those twenty pieces of silver they got for him have burned into their soul and now they do not want any money gained dishonestly.

*27 But as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey feed at the encampment, he saw his money; and there it was, in the mouth of his sack. 28 So he said to his brothers, "My money has been restored, and there it is, in my sack!" Then their hearts failed them and they were afraid, saying to one another, "What is this that*

God has done to us?"

These men have changed. They are not rejoicing in extra money. They are nervous and jumpy about sin. Even when they are not guilty, they feel guilty, and fret over whether they will be called guilty.

*Proverbs 28:1 The wicked flee when no one pursues, But the righteous are bold as a lion. (Pro 28:1)*

Now they return and relate the tale to Jacob, and what the governor of Egypt wants.

*29 Then they went to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan and told him all that had happened to them, saying: 30 "The man who is lord of the land spoke roughly to us, and took us for spies of the country. 31 "But we said to him, 'We are honest men; we are not spies. 32 'We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is with our father this day in the land of Canaan.' 33 "Then the man, the lord of the country, said to us, 'By this I will know that you are honest men: Leave one of your brothers here with me, take food for the famine of your households, and be gone. 34 'And bring your youngest brother to me; so I shall know that you are not spies, but that you are honest men. I will grant your brother to you, and you may trade in the land.'" 35 Then it happened as they emptied their sacks, that surprisingly each man's bundle of money was in his sack; and when they and their father saw the bundles of money, they were afraid.*

Jacob's response is a response is a response of fear and faithlessness.

*36 And Jacob their father said to them, "You have bereaved me: Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. All these things are against me." 37 Then Reuben spoke to his father, saying, "Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you."*

*38 But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is left alone. If any calamity should befall him along the way in which you go, then you would bring down my gray hair with sorrow to the grave." (Gen 42:1)*

Though Jacob is not the one afflicted with an evil conscience, his response is a classic illustration of a wrong response to guilt. No doubt his sons had learned some of this from him. He hangs on to what is precious, refusing to give it up, fearful of what might happen if he does. He will not give up Benjamin, to the point where he is consigning Simeon to lifelong prison in Egypt.

Now this is not realistic. Only if somehow this famine miraculously reverses itself in a matter of months will they avoid having to go back to Egypt. But this kind of response is running away from reality, not dealing with life as it is.

This is the perfectly wrong way to deal with a guilty conscience. Hang on to your pride for dear life, refuse to face the unknown, refuse to have the courage to let go and confess the sin, refuse to face the fact that as time marches on, at some point, you will have to.

How should you deal with an accusing conscience?

*19 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus,  
20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh,  
21 and having a High Priest over the house of God,  
22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb 10:19-22)*

When you know there is full and complete pardon in the blood of Christ, you do three things. First, you stop denying the sin and running away from God. Two, you approach God in prayer, and confess your sin as sin before God, turning from it and asking Him to cleanse you through Jesus Christ. Third, as far as is possible, you seek to make restitution if you have harmed others, and

accept God's consequences as part of how He chastens His children.

So let us thank God for our consciences and respond to them tenderly. As we will see, these men are going to be brought face to face with their sin, and repent of it and confess it. The sooner we do that, the sooner we find mercy.