

Physical Hunger, Spiritual Guilt: The Awakening of Conscience
Genesis 42

Hunger is a great motivator, and in Genesis 42, God uses it to draw Joseph's brothers to Egypt. There, God uses Joseph to expose their spiritual guilt. Admitting their sin was the first step in transforming this dysfunctional family into a godly nation.

Dealing with Hunger, Dealing with Guilt

- *Starving in Canaan, ten sons head to Egypt (1-5)*
- *Joseph meets his brothers; guilt surfaces (6-26)*
- *Back home, all is not well (27-38)*

God's 'Severe Mercy': His Process for Healing

- *God's sovereign goodness is revealed in times of suffering.*
- *The godly person will give God time to deal with the guilty.*
- *God doesn't want us to wallow in guilt, but to deal with sin.*



Impeachment is in the news this week; actually, that isn't anything new. Some folks have been calling for Trump's impeachment since the day after he was elected. In all of U.S. history, only two presidents have been impeached, neither was removed from office, and both cases, like the present one, had more to do with politics than any actual 'high crimes and misdemeanors.' It's interesting that the president most people think was impeached is Nixon; he wasn't – he resigned from office. But for a few minutes I want to take you back to the turbulent summer of 1974.

Of all the men caught up in the Watergate scandal, none was considered more evil than Chuck Colson, President Nixon's 'hatchet man,' known as the 'evil genius' of an evil administration. Colson himself said he was "valuable to the President...because I was willing...to be ruthless in getting things done." He was cold, hard, and heartless.

As the Watergate inquiry spread, Colson was indicted for some crimes he had not committed; his lawyers planned to fight the charges in court. But something had happened in Colson's life: In 1973 he trusted Christ as Savior, and his heart began to change. He met with a group of men every week for prayer and Bible study. He wasn't guilty of what he was charged, but Colson knew he *was* guilty of other wrongs, and his guilt ate at him. He decided that he would plead guilty to what he had done. His lawyers thought he was nuts. No one expects politicians to voluntarily admit doing anything wrong! Politicians accuse their opponents of all sorts of crimes, while portraying themselves as paragons of virtue. What Colson planned to do was unheard of!

Before Colson announced his decision, he decided to tell the Christian men he met with what he was planning to do. In his book *Born Again*, he recounts his conversation with one of them, Senator Harold Hughes of Iowa.

“Harold, I’ve reached a decision. I’m going to plead guilty to something I did do...if I do, the prosecutors will drop the other charges. The plea should be good for the country...” Even as I spoke I could taste the new freedom that would soon be mine.

Harold’s expression was grim. “How much time will you get?”

“Five years is maximum.” Somehow the words did not chill me as they always had before.

“That’s tough. I don’t think I could do it.”

“I’m going to, Harold, unless you and the other brothers disagree. I’m convinced I must.”

Harold’s rugged face relaxed and a wide grin spread across it. “Hallelujah!” he shouted. “I could never have advised you to do it, but I’ve been waiting for this day. It kills me, it hurts so much, but I’m swelling up with joy.”

Colson knew his own guilt. His relationship with Jesus Christ had brought it to the surface of his heart and mind. When he made the decision to admit his wrong, freedom flooded his heart. Guilt is an awful thing to live with, but when we have done wrong, it is God’s gift to get us to deal with sin.

That brings us to Gen 42 – some 4000 years ago, and the narrative of the life of Joseph. This chapter unfolds in the halls of government power in Egypt, one of the greatest dynasties in world history. But the story this morning is about a famine and physical hunger, and guilt which led to an awakening of conscience.

Dealing with Hunger, Dealing with Guilt

- *Starving in Canaan, ten sons head to Egypt (1-5)*

The setting for the story is the famine which Pharaoh had a dream about and Joseph had interpreted, leading to him to become an immensely powerful ruler in Egypt. People from countries all over the near east came to Egypt to get food, because the famine was everywhere.

It was bad in Canaan, too – where Jacob and his eleven sons lived. The caravans heading down to Egypt passed through southern Canaan where they lived. They have no food, and Jacob is angry with his sons. “Why are you just standing around looking at each other! There is grain in Egypt – go down there and buy some so we won’t die of starvation!” (1-2) Jacob was bitter at the loss of Joseph, and was still playing favorites with his sons – Benjamin, the child of his favorite wife, Rachel, was not sent to get food; he stayed at home while the others went to Egypt.

- *Joseph meets his brothers; guilt surfaces (6-26)*

This leads to a classic confrontation: Ten brothers come to get food from their brother who they sold into slavery thirteen years before – except that they don’t know it is Joseph.

The first audience before Joseph is recounted in vv6-17, and it is delicious. Joseph recognizes his brothers, but he disguises himself to make sure they won't know him. He accuses them of being spies. They plead their innocence, and in v13, explain their family situation this way:

“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.”

It's a fascinating moment: They have repeated the lie that Joseph was killed so often that they have come to believe he is dead – and don't realize that he is standing right in front of them! He puts them in prison for three days.

After three days, he meets with them again. To prove they are not spies, he announces that one of them must remain in prison while the others go back to Canaan and return with their youngest brother. One of them will have to become a prisoner in Egypt. They must choose one to stay...and this leads to the second amazing scene.

Joseph was using an interpreter to communicate with his brothers, so they thought he couldn't understand them, and in v22, an amazing thing happens; their sin of selling Joseph into slavery 13 years before bubbles to the surface:

Reuben answered them, saying, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do not sin against the boy’; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood.”

Joseph turned away and wept. Guilt was working.

Simeon is bound and taken away to prison, and Joseph tells the workers to fill their bags with grain, and put their money back in their sacks. Why did he do this? The text doesn't tell us, but it seems Joseph was testing them; the money in their bags would make them look like thieves. Would they come back for their brother, even when they appear to be criminals?

- *Back home, all is not well (27-38)*

On the way home, they discover the money in their bags and are terrified. Immediately they experience guilt:

“What is this that God has done to us?” (v28)

They recognize that their sin is against God, and they fear Him! When they get home, they tell Jacob everything that happened, and that to free Simeon from prison in Egypt, they must return with Benjamin. As the chapter comes to an end, Jacob he'll never let Benjamin go – but hunger is a compelling thing, as we will see next week.

Hinge: Sheldon Vanauken wrote a wonderful book many years ago entitled *A Severe Mercy*, a haunting story of his journey through love, life, and death to the place where he finally knew God. The title says it all: God used some *severe* things in his life to show *mercy*; the road of grief led him to submit his life to God.

On the surface, Gen 42 is a story of famine, suffering, and imprisonment. But the narrator wants us to see God's hand guiding affairs: God gave Pharaoh his dream, God brought the famine, and God was beginning healing.

God's 'Severe Mercy': His Process for Healing

- *God's sovereign goodness is revealed in times of suffering.*

The first truth that we need to recognize here is that God works in our lives in times of suffering. *He is there, and He is not silent*, Francis Schaeffer wrote. *God whispers in our pleasures, and shouts in our pains*, C.S. Lewis wrote.

They both learned this from Scripture. For example, the Apostle Paul appealed three times for God to remove his 'thorn in the flesh,' but instead of taking his physical impediment, God taught him a spiritual truth:

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12.9-10)

Later, Paul wrote a letter from prison to the church at Philippi; he was facing possible death, and might never be freed, yet he wrote things like: *For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain; I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am in; and I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (1.21; 4.11,13)*

James begins his epistle this way: *Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let*

endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The family of Jacob – the brothers who would become the twelve tribes of Israel, needed a spiritual renewal. It required God's severe hand, but it was His mercy. *God's sovereign goodness is revealed in times of suffering.*

- *The godly person will give God time to deal with the guilty.*

The second lesson that we see in Gen 42 is this: *The godly person will give God time to deal with the guilty.* How tempting might it have been for Joseph, holding all the cards, to have spoken the word and have his brothers put to death? After what they put him through – 13 years of slavery and imprisonment?! How tempting to make them beg for mercy, to admit their guilt or die?!

Instead, he recognizes the first hint of the awakening of their conscience. They are finally coming to grips with their sin. They are dealing with their guilt.

Brothers and sisters, if we can learn this lesson, we will greatly enhance our witness to God's grace. When you or I encounter someone who is in the grip of sin, we want them to renounce it immediately, repent, and turn from doing evil. But God is *patient*...it's one of the fruits of the Spirit. Do you know someone who is thumbing their nose at God, embracing sin, resisting the Lord? Pray for them daily, weep for them, cry out to God for them, and give God time to deal with them.

- *God doesn't want us to wallow in guilt, but to deal with sin.*

Finally, guilt is a gift of God to awaken our consciences to our rebellion against God – but *God doesn't want us to wallow in guilt; He wants us to deal with sin.*

Maybe you've heard a well-meaning preacher who made you feel rotten and worthless, who assailed you for your sins, and told you to 'turn or burn.' My daughter wrote me this last week about a street preacher on the campus of Texas Tech. He may have meant well, but instead of drawing students to the Christ who loves them and died for them, he buried them under a heap of guilt.

Awareness of sin is a good thing, but it's just a means to an end. If you're aware of your sin this morning, I don't stand before you to condemn you, but to introduce you to the One who can take your sin problem away. When Jesus died on the cross, He announced 'It is finished,' because He had just paid the price for every sin ever committed. Mine, yours, everyone's. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved (Jn 3.17). Look at the cross this morning: Do you see your Savior dying there? That was for your sin and mine. Believe in Him right now, receive His payment for your sins.

And that's only the beginning! Every Christian knows the twinge of guilt when we've wandered from the path God wants for us. The moment we recognize that – if you know you've sinned against God – here's the promise for you:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn. 1.9)

Are you feeling guilt in your spirit this morning? Don't wallow in it. Guilt is God's Spirit calling you back to Himself. Listen to your conscience, deal with your sin, and experience His mercy and forgiveness.

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God's sovereign hand provides the setting for the transformation of His chosen people from a dysfunctional and fractured family, to a repentant and united clan. The famine which God had providentially revealed to Joseph through the medium of Pharaoh's dream was not only in Egypt, but throughout the world (41.57) – and thus, in Canaan, where Jacob and his other sons lived. Hunger is a great motivator: Hearing of the abundance of food in Egypt, Jacob sends his sons (except for Benjamin) on a life-or-death mission. Interestingly, as the brothers had once sold Joseph into slavery to members of a caravan traveling to Egypt, they now join themselves with a caravan of others traveling to Egypt seeking food. Implicit in this is God's hand in bringing the brothers back together (1-5).

The main tension in the story is the meeting between Joseph and his brothers (6-28): Joseph knows them, they do not know him. They are in need; he has what they need. Joseph 'holds all the cards'! Where they once controlled him (and sold him into slavery), he now controls them, and imprisons them. The impact of Joseph's accusations that they are spies leads them first to give their family details – including an admission that they think Joseph is dead (13), then when pressed, to express their guilt at their treatment of Joseph, an admission they do not realize Joseph is able to understand (21-24)! When, at Joseph's instruction, they find their money included in their bags of grain on their way back to Canaan, their suspicions of God's punishment for their sins are confirmed. Simeon remains in prison in Egypt, until the brothers return with Benjamin.

Returning home to Jacob, they recount all the details, and the demand for Benjamin to be brought. This Jacob refuses to relent to – showing no concern for Simeon languishing in an Egyptian prison (29-38)! Reuben's lame attempt to reassure Jacob of Benjamin's safe return by putting his sons' lives on the line is foolish, and Jacob is unmoved. But hunger will once again force his hand.

Numbers 32.23 says, "Be sure your sins will find you out." The purpose of exposing sin is not to cause us to wallow in guilt, but to deal with it. David experienced the agony of living with hidden guilt, and the freedom of 'coming clean' (Pss. 32, 51). This 'confession' of guilt is the first step in the spiritual transformation of Israel (Jacob) and his family. Awareness of their sin – that it was sin! – opens the way to further spiritual awakenings. As 1 John 1.9 promises, If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Genesis 42 is therefore a revelation of God's 'severe mercy.' Sheldon VanAuken's book with that title exhibits this in a contemporary setting, as the death of his wife drives him into the arms of Jesus. Every Christian can learn from this, to trust a loving God's providential hand to draw them to Himself. This was God's plan to prepare the sons of Israel to be worthy heads of the nation of Israel.

Digging Deeper

1. The 'setting' for Genesis 42 reaches all the way back to Gen 37 and Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers. He was just 17 years old then (37.2), and now he is 30 (41.46)! While we usually focus on Joseph being a slave and in prison for all these years, think about his brothers: For thirteen years they have hid a lie from their father. Indeed, they have come to view Joseph as being dead (42.13)! How would it feel to 'live a lie' like that? How did David feel when he hid his sin (see and hear his inner torment in Psalms 32 and 51). How did Peter feel after denying he knew Christ three times (cf. Lk.22.54-62)? How good would it feel to confess and 'come clean' before God?
2. At this point, it would be good to stop and consider: What God means for good, Satan tries to distort or counterfeit, in order to undermine our Christian lives. He tells people they *shouldn't* feel guilt for sins they commit, and on the other hand, tells us we *should* feel guilt for things that are not wrong. What is *false guilt*? How does God want to use guilt in our lives? How does Satan want to use it?
3. God's purpose of exposing sin is never to cause us to wallow in guilt; that is Satan's game. What is Satan referred to as in Rev. 12.10? Have you ever felt the burden of his accusations in your life? Instead of letting him 'beat you up,' what does Scripture tell us? See Romans 8.31-39 and 1 John 1.9!
4. The 'big story' that made headlines in 1900 B.C. was the awful famine throughout the Middle East. Like any famine, there was starvation and sorrow. But the biblical story – the one that rings down through history, is what God did in and with that famine: He took something bad, and used it for good. Sin has brought sickness, suffering, and death into this temporal world, and we can't escape it, but we can have a new perspective on it! How can we demonstrate an 'eternal perspective' in times of trial or suffering or persecution? For a *radical* view, see James 1.2-4!