

Genesis 42:1-38

The Power of a Clean Conscience

“Let conscience be your guide”

- Or at least, that is what the old adage tells us

The Bible never tells us to abide by this truth

- God’s Word, not our conscience, should be our guide

The conscience is that faculty of our being which acts as a moral barometer¹

- It distinguishes what is right and wrong
- It recognizes the right behavior
- It restrains the wrong behavior
- It passes judgment based on our actions

The problem is that the conscience is only as good as the information it is given

- In other words, the conscience can become distorted or misguided

Our conscience is subjective

- That’s why we can’t choose to live by our conscience
- It was never designed to be an infallible guide

The Bible uses many descriptions when speaking about the human conscience

- Good (Acts 23:1; 1 Tim 1:5, 19; Heb 13:18; 1 Pet 3:16, 21)
- Weak (1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12)
- Clear (1 Tim 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3)
- Blameless (Acts 24:16)
- Seared (1 Tim 4:2)
- Defiled (Tit 1:15)
- Perfect (Heb 9:9)
- Cleansed (Heb 9:14)
- Evil (Heb 10:22)

Our conscience can bear witness to truth (Rom 2:15; 9:1; 2 Cor 1:12; 4:2)

- But once again, this depends on how you teach and train your conscience

For example, Paul can talk about the unbeliever having a sense of morality

- Listen to his words in Romans 1:32, “**although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them**”

Unbelievers have a God-given faculty by which they know what is right and wrong

- But those who have not submitted their lives to Christ have suppressed the truth (Rom 1:18)
- Although they know what is right, they don’t want to live by that truth

¹ Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, “Conscience” by A.M. Rehwinkel, 267.

There needs to be a proper balance, however

- On the one hand, when the conscience is properly inputted with Biblical truth, we dare not ignore our conscience
- On the other hand, when the conscience is distorted, we dare not follow our conscience

This morning, we will tag along with the brothers of Joseph

- We will notice that 20 years after selling Joseph as a slave, they still struggle with a guilty conscience

Let's read Genesis 42:1-38

This passage informs us of how God providentially intervened to confront these men over their guilt over the past

- God was forcing these brothers to face up to their past sins

And do you know who God used to confront them?

- You guessed it
- Their own brother, Joseph

Joseph would have been the last person that the brothers expected to meet

- Yet God arranges for a personal meeting between these family members

In Genesis 42, we see three steps to take when you have a guilty conscience

- Be willing to do what you don't want to do
- Be willing to confess what you don't want to confess
- Be willing to sacrifice what you don't want to sacrifice

These steps will help you to overcome guilt over the past

- Who doesn't want to live with a clean conscience?

I. Be willing to do what you don't want to do (42:1-5)

Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt,

After nearly 20 years, we are reintroduced to Jacob

- The last time that we encountered him was in Genesis 37:34

Genesis 37:34 was when the brothers of Joseph returned and lied about Joseph's whereabouts

- You may remember that they had killed a goat and poured some of its blood on Joseph's special tunic
- Hence, they staged the scene so that it appeared that Joseph had been killed

Jacob was heartbroken, of course

- Joseph was his favorite son
- Joseph was the firstborn son of Rachel, his favorite wife

This favoritism and preferential treatment really divided the family

It has been over 20 years since Jacob heard the news about Joseph's supposed death

- In actuality, Joseph is alive and well

- He was 17 when he was sold to Potiphar
- He was 28 when he interpreted the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker
- He was 30 when he stood before Pharaoh and interpreted his dreams
- He was 37 when the seven years of plenty ended

Somehow Jacob hears that there is food in Egypt

- It's not until verse 5 that we are told that the famine had reached Canaan
- It has been assumed thus far

and Jacob said to his sons, "Why are you staring at one another?"

Being the authority in the home, father Jacob speaks up and asks his sons a rather terse question, "Why are you staring at one another?"

- Apparently, the sons had grown complacent and lazy about obtaining food²

² And 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."

Jacob cuts to the heart of the issue when speaking with his sons

- There is food in Egypt
- There is no food here in Canaan
- So go buy some grain!

We know that this is a serious issue because Jacob tells his sons to purchase grain "so that we may live and not die"

- This was literally a life or death situation
- They didn't have a choice, other than death

³ Then ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt.

We are then told that the sons of Jacob go down to Egypt

- Except they are not called sons of Jacob
- They are called "brothers of Joseph"

In Genesis 42, we note the frequency by which these individuals are called by their different names

- 5 times they are called "sons" of Jacob
- 18 times they are called "brothers" of Joseph

It is clear that the author wants to focus on their relationship to Joseph

- That makes sense, because they will soon encounter Joseph

² Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record*, 594.

⁴ But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "I am afraid that harm may befall him."

Only ten brothers of Joseph go down

- Jacob does not allow Benjamin to go with his brothers

The reason for holding Benjamin back is based on fear, "I am afraid that harm may befall him"

- Jacob has already lost Joseph
- He doesn't want to lose Benjamin

Remember that Joseph and Benjamin were the only two sons born from Rachel

- Rachel actually died giving birth to Benjamin

We recall the special treatment that Joseph received when he was alive

- Now it seems that all the preferential treatment was going toward Benjamin
- He was the apple of Jacob's eye³

This must have been an interesting family dynamic

- Joseph was "dead"
- Benjamin was favored
- The other ten seem to be on the outside of their father's love and concern

Think about Jacob's statement

- He is fearful about Benjamin's safety
- But what about the other ten?
- Weren't they also his children?

It seems that the ten sons were expendable

- Hardly the model of a godly, loving father

⁵ So the sons of Israel came to buy grain among those who were coming, for the famine was in the land of Canaan *also*.

We are told that the ten sons went down to Egypt since "the famine was in the land of Canaan *also*"

- This famine was far-reaching
- It was not limited only to Egypt

Moses switches the name of Jacob to Israel

- This was the new name given to Jacob after he wrestled with God

Israel's name is mentioned only once, here in verse 5

- Jacob's name, however, is mentioned six times (42:1^{twice}, 4, 29, 36, 38) in this chapter

As we will see throughout this chapter, Jacob is not displaying the same courage and boldness that he did when he wrestled with the Angel

- On the contrary, Jacob displays self-pity and self-centeredness

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 2*, 405.

God's purpose and plan was for Israel to move to Egypt

- There God would take care of this family

The ten sons had to do what they didn't want to do

- They didn't want to go to Egypt

These brothers knew that they had sold Joseph

- For all they knew, Joseph was in Egypt
- They didn't want to be around him

There will be times in your life when you need to do something that you don't want to do

- But you know that you need to follow through

In order to have a clean conscience, you must submit yourself to God and follow His Word

- You may have to take certain actions that you don't want to do
- You may have to go back and make things right with certain individuals

Yet, if you are willing to obey God and His Word, He will give you His grace

- You won't go at it alone

Joseph's brothers needed to be willing to do what they didn't want to do

- *But there was a second step toward having a clean conscience*

II. Be willing to confess what you don't want to confess (42:6-26)

⁶Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land.

In verse 6, Moses repeats some information that we already know

- But it is repeated for the sake of emphasis and effect

The ten sons of Jacob are heading to Egypt to buy grain

- We know that Joseph is in charge of the grain – but they don't
- We know that Joseph is the prime minister of Egypt – but they don't

If anyone wanted to purchase grain in Egypt, who did they have to talk to?

- Joseph

But these ten brothers of Joseph have no clue what they are walking into

- They don't realize that they will come face-to-face with their brother
- The same brother who they had sold 20 years prior

And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down to him with *their* faces to the ground.

To travel from Canaan to Egypt would take about a week

- The brothers of Joseph come before “**the ruler of the land**”
- Of course, this is Joseph – totally unknown to them

With proper respect, they “**came and bowed down to him with *their* faces to the ground**”

- They were coming into the presence of a powerful individual

This ruler could have denied any request for food

- This ruler had the power to control their future

But something majestic was taking place

- Over 20 years prior, Joseph had relayed two dreams to his brothers and father
- These dreams signified that his family would bow down to him

His brothers hated him for this dream

- They weren't about to bow down to him!

Yet what do we read in verse 6?

- They bowed down!

God was faithful to fulfill Joseph's dream!

⁷ When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly.

Furthermore, when Joseph saw his brothers, "**he recognized them**"

- He recognized their appearance, even after 20 years of separation

But we are taken back that Joseph "**disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly**"

- Why would he do this?
- Why wouldn't he reveal himself to them?

Joseph must test his brothers

- Did they still hate him?
- What happened to the family?

Joseph devises a plan whereby he will obtain information from his brothers

- Of course, part of that plan is to keep his true identity concealed from them
- *Until the right time*

And he said to them, "Where have you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." ⁸ But Joseph had recognized his brothers, although they did not recognize him.

Joseph inquires as to where his brothers had come from

- They told him that they had traveled from Canaan to buy food

Once again, we are told that Joseph recognized his brothers

- But the brothers didn't recognize Joseph

There are a few good reasons why the brothers didn't recognize Joseph⁴

- They thought he was dead
- He was probably clean shaven
- He speaks in the Egyptian tongue, using an interpreter in speaking with them
- He wears the clothing fit for a high-ranking official
- He has an Egyptian name

⁹ And 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 tries to intimidate his brothers by accusing them of spying out the land

- Imagine the power and wealth that Egypt would have during this time of history⁵

Imagine having enough grain to supply all the countries with food

- Egypt was powerful
- Egypt was wealthy

If a foreign power wanted to take control of Egypt, they would be powerful and wealthy as well

- The threat of an ambush was real
- No doubt Joseph had anticipated this

¹⁰ Then they said to him, "No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹ We are all sons of one man; we are honest men, your servants are not spies."

But the brothers deny this accusation

- They had come to buy food
- Not to spy out the land

They reason that it would not be wise for such a large number of the same family to travel together to carry out a spy mission

- If they were killed, then it would be a huge loss to the family

Verse 11 is a mouthful, "**We are all sons of one man**"

- They spoke more truth than they realized⁶

The brothers were referring to themselves

- Little did they realize that the man to whom they were speaking was their brother Joseph
- Joseph was, of course, the son of the same father

Verse 11 also records the brothers as confessing to be "**honest men**"

- This is a stretch, to say the least

They had lied to Jacob about Joseph's true whereabouts

- For 20 years, no one dared to tell Jacob the truth
- Not exactly the epitome of honesty, right?

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *NICOT, Genesis 18-50*, 519.

⁵ Morris, 595.

⁶ Wenham, 407.

¹² Yet he said to them, “No, but you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land!”

For a second time, Joseph repeats his accusation of spying

¹³ 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 more.”

The brothers of Joseph volunteer more information

- They tell this powerful man that there were “*twelve brothers in all*”

Of course, ten of them are present

- “*behold, the youngest is with our father today*”
- “*and one is no more*”

Perhaps Joseph wanted to see if Benjamin was still alive

- The brothers were evil enough to sell Joseph and get rid of him
- They very well could have attempted something similar with Benjamin, since he was also the son of Rachel, Jacob’s favorite wife⁷

Remember, Joseph had the power to reject their offer for food

- He could have sent them away empty-handed

But now he hears that Benjamin is alive

- At least, that is what these brothers claim to be true

Joseph’s heart must have skipped a beat when he heard his brothers say, “*one is no more*”

- They were obviously talking about Joseph!

¹⁴ And Joseph said to them, “It is as I said to you, you are spies; ¹⁵ by this you will be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here!”

For the third time, Joseph accuses them of being spies

- His intimidation is working
- The brothers are volunteering more and more information

Joseph even swears by Pharaoh that these brothers won’t leave Egypt until the youngest brother is brought there

- As stated in verse 15, this was a way for Joseph to “*test*” his brothers

¹⁶ 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.”

The original plan was for 9 of the brothers to be kept in prison while one brother returned and brought back Benjamin

- If Benjamin was alive, then the other brothers would be released
- If Benjamin was alive, then the false accusation of being spies would be lifted

⁷ Wenham, 407.

¹⁷ So he put them all together in prison for three days.

Then Joseph proceeds to put all ten of the brothers in prison for three days

- This was obviously part of the intimidation process
- He wanted them to be together to talk about what to do

Perhaps this also a time for the ten brothers to decide who would return to bring back Benjamin

¹⁸ Now Joseph said to them on the third day, “Do this and live, for I fear God:

On the third day, Joseph tells his brothers that he fears God

- This would have been interesting to hear, especially from such a powerful Egyptian official

¹⁹ if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰ and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die.” And they did so.

Joseph’s original plan was for 9 brothers to stay back and 1 to return to Canaan

- But now he switches everything
- Now 1 should remain in Egypt while 9 return to Canaan

There are a few reasons why Joseph changed his mind⁸

- Nine voices would be better than one about convincing Jacob to allow Benjamin to travel to Egypt
- One son could not possibly carry enough grain back to Canaan
- If Jacob thought that nine of his children were dead in Egypt, he would be hesitant about allowing Benjamin to travel there

The 9 were to carry grain back to their families so that “**you will not die**”

- Joseph knew that there would be 7 years of severe famine
- Most likely, this event took place in the first year of the famine

²¹ Then they said to one another, “Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us.”

What is told in verses 21-22 is simply amazing

- In front of Joseph, the brothers begin to confess their wrongdoing about Joseph
- The ten brothers interpret their circumstances in light of their mistreatment of Joseph

We are told things in these verses that we didn’t know in chapter 37

- We see things from the perspective of the brothers

The brothers talk about “**the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would listen**”

- After 20 years, they could still remember vivid details of that day
- Joseph had begged for his life; however, the brothers sold him anyway

⁸ Hamilton, 526.

Now the brothers begin to think that Divine justice is at work

- They were reaping what they had sowed

²² And 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.”

Shockingly, Reuben speaks up with an attitude of “I told you so!”

- He had warned the other brothers not to harm Joseph
- But they had failed to listen to Reuben

Reuben’s words were chilling, “**Now comes the reckoning for his blood**”

- They were now responsible because of Joseph’s death

²³ They did not know, however, that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between them.

We as the reader just stand here with our mouths open

- We understand what is going on
- But the brothers don’t

The ten brothers of Joseph confess their guilt to one another

- They come clean about how they had mistreated Joseph

The amazing thing is that Joseph was right there, hearing everything

- Of course, he had pretended to speak through an interpreter
- But he understood what they were saying

²⁴ And he turned away from them and wept.

Overcome with emotion, Joseph had to turn away

- He wept with great sadness

He had just heard his own brothers express remorse and sorrow over how they had mistreated him

- But he still couldn’t reveal himself to them yet
- There was still the issue of Jacob and Benjamin

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

To provide a visual reminder of how serious Joseph was, “**he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes**”

- Having Simeon bound with chains would have been a powerful image
- Joseph meant business

Joseph had almost unlimited power in Egypt

- There was nothing the brothers could do to stop Joseph

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. And thus it was done for them. ²⁶ So they loaded their donkeys with their grain, and departed from there.

These ten brothers had traveled to Egypt to purchase food

- But they experienced more than they bargained for

Joseph hatches another element of his plan

- Unknown to them, Joseph gives his brothers' money back to them
- He has it hidden in their bags of grain

This little piece of the puzzle will play a larger role later in the narrative

- For now, we are merely setting the stage

The 9 sons of Jacob head back home

- They have grain with they didn't have before
- But they don't have Simeon who they had before

Perhaps this was the first time that the brothers had discussed their feelings about Joseph

- Perhaps they had tried to put it out their mind

But being in Egypt brought everything back in graphic detail

- They were overcome with guilt

Have you ever been there before?

- Have you ever had a guilty conscience?

Perhaps weeks or months or years after a certain event, you have sorrow over what happened

- Or it could be that you have yet to come to grips with your guilty conscience

These brothers confessed their guilt to one another

- This was the beginning stages of repentance
- They had admitted their part in the sinful mistreatment of Joseph

The brothers of Joseph had taken the first two steps toward having a clean conscience

- *They were willing to do what they didn't want to do*
- *They were willing to confess what they didn't want to confess*

But there is a third step toward having a clean conscience...

III. Be willing to sacrifice what you don't want to sacrifice (42:27-38)

²⁷ And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money; and behold, it was in the mouth of his sack. ²⁸ Then he said to his brothers, "My money has been returned, and behold, it is even in my sack."

After leaving Egypt, the brothers faced a long journey back home

- It would take them about a week of traveling
- So there would be many stops along the way

At one of the stops, one of the brothers made a startling discovery

- As he went to feed his donkey, he discovered that his money was in his bag

This brother told his other siblings about the situation

- They had been accused of being spies
- Now they could be accused of being thieves!

And their hearts sank, and they *turned* trembling to one another, saying, “What is this that God has done to us?”

Naturally, the brothers were fearful

- The ruler of the land had already taken Simeon
- What would he do if he found out that they didn't pay for their grain?

Our English versions say, “**their hearts sank**”

- This realization caused them to be deeply disturbed

The 9 brothers trembled and said, “**What is this that God has done for us?**”

- Notice that they immediately interpret this as a sign of God's justice

They didn't attribute this to fate or luck

- No, God was behind this!

²⁹ When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them,

Finally, the brothers arrive back home

- They told him “**all that had happened to them**”

saying, ³⁰ “The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly with 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 today in the land of Canaan.’

The brothers speak about how the ruler of the land had spoken harshly with them and accused them of being spies

- They defended themselves by speaking about their family

³³ And the man, the lord of the land, said to us, ‘By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me and take *grain for the famine of your households, and go.* ³⁴ But bring your youngest brother to me that I may know that you are not spies, but honest men. I will give your brother to you, and you may trade in the land.’”

But the additional information about the family caused Simeon to remain in Egypt

- He was held as a type of ransom

Bringing Benjamin back would prove that they were not spies

These brothers didn't tell their father "all" that happened to them in Egypt⁹

- They omitted their three day prison sentence
- They omitted Simeon's being held hostage
- They omitted Joseph's threat about coming back without Benjamin

These brothers had told Joseph that they were "honest men"

- Yet they didn't tell their father everything

³⁵ Now it came about as they were emptying their sacks, that behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack; and when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were dismayed.

When all the brothers emptied their bags, they were astonished to find that all their money had been returned

- Three simple words capture the moment, "they were dismayed"

What would they say when they returned for Simeon?

- How would they tell the ruler of the land about this?
- What would he do to them?

³⁶ And their father Jacob said to them, "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin; all these things are against me."

Jacob speaks to his sons and accuses them of bringing more grief upon him

- Joseph is gone
- Simeon is gone
- Now they want to take away Benjamin

Jacob wallows in self-pity, "all these things are against me"

- "Woe is me"

In actuality, these events were orchestrated by God to provide for Israel and his family

- Without a trip to Egypt, Israel would die

God had made some tremendous promises regarding Israel

- God was clearly bringing those promises to fruition
 - o In His timing
 - o In His way

³⁷ Then Reuben spoke to his father, saying, "You may put my two sons to death if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my care, and I will return him to you."

Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben, speaks up rashly

- He will act as guarantee that Benjamin will return safely
- In other words, Jacob could trust him

If Reuben didn't return with Benjamin, then Jacob could "put my two sons to death"

- Hardly the type of assurance that Jacob needs right now

⁹ Wenham, 410.

³⁸ But Jacob said, “My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.”

But Jacob puts his foot down

- He will not allow Benjamin to travel to Egypt

Jacob’s words are sobering, “My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow”

- He firmly believes that Joseph is dead
- He fears that if Benjamin travels and encounters harm, he would die in sorrow

Jacob could not see himself living if that meant living without Benjamin

- This shows just how far the favoritism had gone in his mind

If the other sons died, that is fine

- After all, Jacob doesn’t seem to be too concerned that Simeon is still in Egypt

The brothers of Joseph show us three steps in obtaining a clean conscience

1. They were willing to go where they didn’t want to go
 - a. They didn’t want to go to Egypt
2. They were willing to confess what they didn’t want to confess
 - a. They didn’t want to talk about what happened with Joseph
3. They were willing to sacrifice what they didn’t want to sacrifice
 - a. Reuben put his own family on the line

How about you?

- If you were to choose a word to describe your conscience this morning, what would it be?
 - o Clean?
 - o Blameless?
 - o Weak?
 - o Seared?
 - o Defiled?
 - o Evil?

You can’t live by your conscience

- It is subjective
- It can fool you

But God’s Word has spoken clearly morning

- It is up to you to make a decision

If you have unresolved issues, then you need to settle them this morning

- Don’t put it off any longer

The apostle Paul could say this in Acts 24:16, “I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men”

- He could also utter these amazing words in an earlier chapter, “I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day” (Acts 23:1)

Can you say that this morning?

- If so, praise God!

But if not, why not?

- What do you need to do in order to have a clean conscience?
- What is the first step that you need to take?