

“THE AWAKENED CONSCIENCE”

The past few chapters have focused upon what happened to Joseph after his brothers sold him as a slave. But now that Joseph has been exalted to the second-highest position in all of Egypt, the scene shifts back to Canaan and shows us what is taking place in the lives of Jacob and his sons. Twenty years had passed since Joseph’s brothers conspired to get rid of him. And they had gotten away with it. Yes, Jacob seems to have developed suspicions about what really happened, as his words at the end of the chapter indicate, but the brothers surely stuck to their story. You can imagine how their consciences must have afflicted them over the course of those twenty years. You can imagine how they must have suppressed their feelings of guilt and rationalized what they had done. As I thought about what it must have been like for them to have their sin go undiscovered for all those years, I was reminded of two similar, yet in the end very different, stories: Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment* and Woody Allen’s film “Crimes and Misdemeanors.” In both stories, the main character commits murder and appears to get away with it. The remainder of each story is about how that character contends with his sense of guilt and his fear of being caught. In Dostoevsky’s book, the murderer, a man named Raskolnikov, is unable to overcome his conscience, and he eventually confesses his crime and finds redemption. But in Allen’s movie, the murderer, a man named Judah Rosenthal, succeeds in slaying his own conscience and he goes on to live a happy life.

Now, which of those stories is reflected in the lives of Joseph’s brothers? At first, they look a lot more like Judah Rosenthal than Raskolnikov. They seem to have

succeeded in killing their consciences. Twenty years passed, and their crime had not yet come back to haunt them. But, as we see in what transpires in this passage, the Lord was not going to allow them to forget what they had done. Twenty years after they committed their sin against Joseph, the Lord was going to awaken their consciences and bring them to a place of repentance, reconciliation, and redemption.

The passage begins with Jacob and his family suffering under the famine that the Lord had predicted through Pharaoh's dreams and their interpretation by Joseph. As we saw last week, God was bringing this famine in order to accomplish his purposes in the lives of his people. For one thing, the Lord used the famine to bring the covenant people to Egypt, where they would be able to grow into a great nation until his appointed time for leading them in the conquest of the Promised Land. And for another thing, the Lord used the famine to awaken Joseph's brothers from their state of spiritual slumber and cause them to repent of their sin.

The opening scene of our passage is one of despair. Jacob and his family are experiencing this great famine and they do not know what to do. They feel as if all hope is lost. The brothers are just sitting around looking at each other, paralyzed by their depression. But then Jacob stands up and rebukes them. He tells them to go to Egypt, where he has heard that there is grain for sale. The Lord put Jacob and his family in a desperate situation in order that he might continue his saving work in their lives. Had they not felt the threat of starvation under that famine, 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 see their sin.

It is important to note, however, that as Jacob sends his sons away, he does not send Benjamin with them. Benjamin, you will remember, was Jacob's other son through his beloved wife Rachel. Rachel's first son was Joseph, and he was gone. Jacob was not about to allow Benjamin to make the trip to Egypt with his brothers. This is a matter that will come up again when the brothers return home.

When the brothers arrived in Egypt, they came before Joseph, who was overseeing the sale of grain. And though they did not recognize him, Joseph recognized them. And when he saw them bowing before him with their faces to the ground, he remembered his dreams. He saw that the Lord was finally bringing to pass what he had showed him those many years before.

One of the questions raised by this text is why Joseph treated his brothers so harshly when he recognized them. Why did he accuse them of being spies when he knew their true identity? Was he being vindictive? Was he seeking revenge? Or was he testing them in some way? The text does not explicitly tell us, and it is impossible for us to see into Joseph's heart and know his motives, but I think that there is enough here for us to conclude that Joseph's motive was something other than revenge. It is true that the brothers were made to endure a small taste of the kind of treatment that Joseph had had to endure in Egypt. They were being falsely accused, just as Joseph had been falsely accused by Potiphar's wife. And they were imprisoned, just as Joseph was. But the Lord

used those circumstances to accomplish his purposes in Joseph's life, and he will do the same in the lives of his brothers.

One of the things that indicates that Joseph is not after revenge is the fact that he ends up dealing with his brothers much more leniently than he had originally said he would. At first, he said that one brother would have to go back to retrieve Benjamin, but after the three days of their imprisonment he allowed all but one of them to return home. Notice how this stands in sharp contrast to how the brothers dealt with Joseph twenty years before. He had begged them for mercy, as they recount in verse 21, but they did not show him any. Now the tables are turned, and Joseph shows them a degree of mercy, even though he is taking one of them as his prisoner. He wants to see what effect such treatment will have upon them. Will they see that he is treating them better than they had treated their own brother? Will they feel any remorse over what they had done? Joseph was testing them.

And the test produced its intended effect. Consciences that had been deadened for twenty years started to come alive and afflict Joseph's brothers. We can see this by the dramatic change that comes over the brothers over the course of their interactions with Joseph in this passage. Look at what they said to Joseph when he first accused them of being spies. They said: "We are honest men." Honest men? Who did they think they were kidding? They had dealt treacherously with their own brother, and then they lied to their father about what happened to him. And they kept that lie alive for two decades,

even as they saw their father mourning inconsolably for the son whom he loved so much.

Honest men? Talk about killing your conscience.

But then, after Joseph throws them in prison for three days and ends up deciding to give them a chance to prove that they really are being honest with him, the brothers finally begin to see their guilt. They admit that they had sinned against Joseph, saying: “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.” They are finally able to see their sin for what it was. They admit that they brought distress upon their brother’s soul.

And not only that, but they also see that the Lord is paying them back for the distress that they caused Joseph by the distress that is now coming upon them. They admit that they are getting exactly what they deserve. They do not do what tends to be our first impulse when we are in situations where we feel that we are being treated unjustly. They do not protest. They do not argue their innocence. It is true that they were not spies. Joseph’s accusation was false, but the brothers did not get hung up on that. They could see that they were getting what their sins deserved. This is the kind of response that is produced in people when God awakens their conscience. They stop making excuses. They stop crying foul. They submit to God’s hand of discipline.

The Lord did not allow the brothers new-found sense of guilt to wear off. It is easy for that to happen, you know. Not every awakened conscience stays awake. As the Puritans would often say, being awakened to see your sin is not the same thing as

repentance unto life. It is a crucial step in salvation, but it does not always end in salvation. Some people feel guilt over their sin for a time but end up having that sense of guilt wear off. Some people's consciences are awakened for a time only to have it eventually go back to sleep. But God did not allow this to happen to Joseph's brothers. He kept after them as they made their way home. How did he do this? In several ways. First of all, the return home itself would have reminded them of what they had done twenty years ago. Once again, they were traveling back to their father to explain why one of them was missing. Memories of Jacob's devastated response to the lie that they had told him about Joseph would have kept haunting them as they drew nearer and nearer to their home.

Then there is the matter of the money in their sacks. The brothers were greatly troubled at this, and with good reason. They had sworn to Joseph that they were honest men. But here they were, leaving Egypt with grain that they had not paid for. They knew it had to be some sort of a mistake, but there was no telling whether Joseph would accept that explanation. How could they go back now? It was almost as if they were doomed to repeat their former sin of giving their brother into the hands of foreigners. Simeon would remain a prisoner until they returned. But how could they go back for him when they would have to explain about the money? They were trapped. Nevertheless, they still see this as God's doing. They see it as something that they brought on themselves. They say, "What is this that God has done to us?"

There is one other way in which the Lord did not allow the brothers' consciences to go back to sleep. Even though Jacob refused to send Benjamin back with them, the brothers were not able to get Egypt out of their minds. Day by day, as their supply of grain was being used up, they knew that there was no escaping the fact that they were going to have to go back. They could see that God was not going to let them off the hook. They were going to have to face up to that man in Egypt who had treated them so harshly when they first arrived there. They were going to have to explain to him why they had failed to pay for the grain that they obtained on their first visit. God was at work in their hearts, and he was not about to let their awakened consciences fall back to sleep.

There is one other thing that I want to mention about this passage. It was not only Joseph's brothers who were being tested here. There was a test for Jacob as well. It was Jacob's favoritism that started this mess in the first place. If he had not treated Joseph as his favorite, his other sons would not have plotted to get rid of Joseph. Has Jacob changed? Will he allow his favoritism to bring further harm to his family? Will he send Benjamin, his only other son by Rachel, so that his other sons can be vindicated and Simeon set free? He will not - at least not yet. He will not part with Benjamin. He could only think of the sorrow he would feel if he lost him too. And so we see that, while Jacob was not a young man here, the Lord still had a lot of work to do in his heart. This serves as a reminder to us that our sanctification is never complete in this life. 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.

This passage shows us how the Lord orders all of the details of his people's lives towards the working out of our salvation. And one thing that has to take place if that work is going to be carried out is for our consciences to be awakened to see the utter sinfulness of our hearts. Listen to how Jonathan Edwards once expressed this:

“God makes men consider and be sensible of what sin they are guilty. Before, it may be, they were very regardless of this. They went on sinning, and never reflected upon what they did; never considered or regarded what or how many sins they committed. They saw no cause why they should trouble their minds about it. But when God convinces them, he brings them to reflect upon themselves; he sets their sins in order before their eyes. He brings their old sins to their minds, so that they are fresh in their memory - things which they had almost forgotten...There is sin enough, which every man has committed, to convince him, that he is sold under sin, that his heart is full of nothing but corruption, if God by his Spirit leads him rightly to consider it.” [“God Makes Men Sensible of Their Misery before He Reveals His Mercy and Love,” in *On Knowing Christ*, 55, 56]

That is precisely what God was doing in the lives of the covenant family in this passage. He was awakening their consciences to see their sin. And he accomplished that awakening through his providential control over the circumstances of their lives. God's providence has ordered different kinds of circumstances for each one of us here tonight,

but we can all be sure that his purpose is always the same for those whom he has appointed to eternal life: to ensure that we have a true sense of our sin, so that we might place all of our hope in Christ.