

How God Deals With Conscience (Part One)

The Consciences of Joseph's Brothers

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Human conscience is a very strange thing. Considering how evil men and women are, it is surprising that we have a conscience at all, yet at times it plagues us. But here is the problem. It is true that we have something called conscience, that sometimes makes us feel guilty for past wrongdoings, but conscience is far from overwhelming in its affects and it is tragically possible for us to kill it, or at the very least, put it to sleep. It has been said that a clear conscience is the sign of a fuzzy memory.

Now how does God deal with human conscience? What is conscience? One writer has compared the conscience to that of a sundial. I find this an interesting analogy. A sundial is able to give fairly good time by day, when the sun is shining on it, but it is totally unable to give any kind of time by night.

We can imagine a boy and a girl on a date and the girl asks, "What time is it? Mother told me to be home by 11 o'clock." It is pitch black when she asks this and the boy says, "Here is the sundial, let's see." So he strikes a match and holds it up to the gnomon and says, "It's only 8:30." Then he moves the match around and he can make the sundial read whatever time he wants. That just does not work in reality, does it?

We say "Let your conscience be your guide," but that too is inadequate because we can wrestle our conscience down. The first time you are tempted to do something you know that you should not do, your conscience will kick in and say no, so you do not do it. But then you begin to work on your conscience, and you say, "I realize that the reason I had in mind at first was probably not right for me to do, and you were right to tell me not to do it, but I've been thinking it over and I think that although I couldn't do it for the reason I mentioned last time, I could probably do it for this reason." Again your conscience says no but not quite as loudly as before.

A little ways down the road you try again with yet another excuse, and another, until eventually you wear your conscience down to where it says nothing and you go out and do what you wanted to anyway.

There is only one way in which conscience can be a sure guide to right conduct and that is when the light of God's Word is shining on it. When the light of God shines on the "sundial" of your conscience, you get the right time every time. Apart from that, the conscience is like a trained circus dog, you whistle once and it will stand up, whistle

twice and it will roll over and the third time it will play dead.

Please turn to Genesis 42. Here we come to this matter of the conscience. In a certain sense, this story in Genesis ceases to be merely Joseph's story, but rather it becomes largely the story of Joseph's ten brothers, and how God works through many devices to awaken their nearly-dead consciences and bring them to repentance and cleansing.

We do not know much about the state of their hearts in the long years leading up to this chapter, but they had been guilty of great wickedness. They never mentioned God, it is probably a good assumption that they were unconverted men. It is therefore only through God working on their consciences that they are actually turned around.

Humans have an ability to kill the conscience, or at the very least, put it into such a deep sleep that it cannot bother us, but we will see how God shines upon a dark conscience—He stirs it and brings about repentance. As we begin this chapter we cannot really sense that the consciences of Joseph's brothers were utterly subdued, perhaps gravely wounded, but not dead. Now why do I say this? It is because of a very strange sentence in Genesis 42.

Genesis 42:1 When Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, Jacob said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?"

This seems totally removed from the subject at hand. Now let us read down to verse 5.

Genesis 42:2-5 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." So Joseph's ten brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "Lest some calamity befall him." And the sons of Israel went to buy grain among those who journeyed, for the famine was in the land of Canaan.

What is the significance of that question, "why do you look at one another?" And what does it have to do with ten men being sent to Egypt to buy grain?

There is a proverb that says, "Never speak of rope in the house of a hangman." When we begin to think about this, Egypt was the place in which these men, excluding Benjamin, had sold Joseph off to. They had planned to kill him, but when the caravan of Midianite merchants came by on their way to Egypt, Judah said:

Genesis 37:27 Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother and our flesh.” And his brothers listened.

So the Midianites counted out the twenty shekels of silver and Joseph was handed over. The last the brothers saw of Joseph was his anguished face as he was led away in chains with the caravan. Then the brothers devised a lie to explain his disappearance to Jacob. They tore Joseph's robe and dipped it in blood pretending that a wild animal had killed and eaten him. Then they tried to put the incident from their minds but they could not.

Now we can imagine the glances between them whenever Joseph's name was mentioned, and we can imagine the weight that must have descended on them whenever the place of their brothers imprisonment was spoken of, Judah must have looked at Reuben, Levi must have thrown anguished glances at Zebulun, that is why Jacob asked, “Why do you keep looking at each other?” As Shakespeare said, “conscience doth make cowards of us all.”

Now the fact that Joseph's brothers looked guiltily at one another instead of taking decisive steps when the family heard that grain was in Egypt shows that their consciences were not entirely dead, just asleep. If nothing more had happened in this story then the mere mention of Egypt, these men would no doubt have continued on their own guilty way and would have died unrepentant. This was their way and not God's way. God now moved to awaken them and lead them to repentance.

This first device God used was famine. He brought the anxiety of deprivation into their lives so that they could no longer remain outwardly content in Canaan. They were forced out of their peaceful backyard pond and into new waters, as it were, because of the word Egypt.

Egypt was the last place on earth these people brothers could have chosen to go. What if they were to meet Joseph? How were they to endure the reproachful hatred of that innocent but physically broken slave, as they pictured him to be?

Still there was famine in Canaan as well as Egypt. Crops had failed, the livestock were dying, and people would die eventually. What were they to do? If there was corn in Egypt, they would have to go there or perish, as much as they dreaded the thought of doing so.

It is interesting how often we find this principle expressed in the Word of God. One classical passage is in the book of the minor prophet Hosea. Hosea had a wife, as you remember, who proved to be unfaithful to him, as God had told him in advance she would be. But although she ran away in her unfaithfulness, God continued to deal with her through Hosea himself and eventually she came back and loved him as at first.

The woman's name was Gomer, and in her case, the first thing God did was to provide for her in spite of her rebelliousness. She had fallen into a place in life in which the man she was living with could no longer provide for her properly. So God sent Hosea to see that she had food to eat and adequate clothes to wear.

Hosea 2:5 For their mother has played the harlot; she who conceived them has behaved shamefully. For she said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink.'

But her lovers had failed her and it was actually Hosea who had provided these items, which we find in verse 8.

Hosea 2: 8 For she did not know that I gave her grain, new wine, and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold—which they prepared for Baal.

This gracious provision by her rejected husband was meant to soften Gomer's heart and bring her back to Hosea, just as God's gracious provision for us is meant to draw us to Him. But Gomer would not allow God's bounty to turn her from her sin. So next God took away her necessities.

Hosea 3:9-12 "Therefore I will return and take away my grain in its time and My new wine in its season, and will take back My wool and My linen, given to cover her nakedness. Now I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and no one shall deliver her from My hand. I will also cause all her mirth to cease, her feast days, her New Moons, her Sabbaths—all her appointed feasts. And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees, of which she has said, 'These are my wages that my lovers have given me.' So I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall eat them.

Has God ever done that in your life, in a figurative sense relating to you? Has He dispatched the anxiety of deprivation, as He did to Gomer or as He did to Joseph's

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brothers, to bring you back to Him? Perhaps the famine you are feeling is a famine of the Word of God.

Now Amos prophesied about the same time in Israel's history as Hosea did, and he also spoke of famine graphically, but without Hosea's imagery. Now Israel refused to accept correction. Amos quoted God as saying in Amos 4:

Amos 4:6-10 “Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord. “I also withheld rain from you, when there were still three months to the harvest. I made it rain on one city, I withheld rain from another city. One part was rained upon, and where it did not rain the part withered. So two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water, but they were not satisfied; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord. “I blasted you with blight and mildew. When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locust devoured them; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord. “I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; your young men I killed with a sword, along with your captive horses; I made the stench of your camps come up into your nostrils; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord.

Notice the anxiety of deprivation here that God used to try to bring them back, but they still would not return to Him. None of these devices worked, so God says in Amos 8:

Amos 8:11-12 “Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord God, “that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but shall not find it.

So when God tells one of His children something the person does not want to hear, he or she often wishes that God would stop talking. But what if God actually did so? Physically, we can live without bread, but we cannot live at all if we are deprived of God's Word. In Matthew 4:4, which is copied from Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus says:

Matthew 4:4 But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’”

To be deprived of that spoken bread is disastrous. The message for us in this is that when we are under the pressure and anxiety of deprivation of famine, we should analyze and evaluate our lives and make sure that we are not taking the Word of God for granted.

Now there is one more great example of this theme in Scripture, but I have held it back until now because of its outcome. It tells of what should happen when God brings the anxiety of deprivation to bear. It is the well known story of the prodigal son.

Jesus said there was a certain man who had two sons and one day the younger of the two came to him to demand his share of the estate. After the father had divided the inheritance, the boy took off into the far country where he wasted his wealth in worldly living.

Luke 15:14-17, 20-21 But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. [This is the prodigal son.] Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. [Thankfully the son's deprived circumstances got through his thick skull and he came to his senses. Then he said in verse 17:] "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

Now having made this resolution, he put it into practice and went home. Notice in verse 17 it says that, "he came to himself." I think that is partly when a converted person answers their own conscience that has been developed through the Word of God, and they begin to realize that their life is not what it should be.

Now this is what the anxiety of deprivation should do for us. If we are of the world, and have squandered our wealth in worldly living, if we have sinned against both God and man, it should bring us to our senses, send us home, and bring about a genuine repentance. If it does that, we will find that our heavenly Father is ready to receive us and joyfully provide for us again.

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Let us get back to the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 41. Now God blessed Joseph in Egypt after his many long years of suffering and gave him a son whom Joseph called Manasseh, which is significant. Manasseh means forgetting. Notice what Joseph said in Genesis 41.

Genesis 41:51 Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh: "For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house."

Joseph had the gift of forgetting, but his brothers did not. In their unrepentant state, there was no forgetting for them. Egypt was to be a reminder for them throughout the rest of their lives. How could they forget what they had done to their brother?

God was working, and the famine in Canaan was the first of His increasingly stringent measures designed to return them to Him. After that they too would be able to forget about the past. The far country would be behind them and they would be together with their father and younger brother again.

The anxiety of deprivation never pleasant, but it is a gift when it brings us to our sense. David said:

Psalms 119:67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.

Now the remarkable thing about the prodigal son is that he actually did what he said he would do. He got up, went to his father, and confessed his sin. This is what the anxiety of deprivation should do to us, should God send it. It should awaken us to our condition and cause us to confess our sin.

As we know, physical want does not always have this effect, so God has to apply harsher treatment at times. God has to do this with Joseph's older brothers. They have been guilty of a great sin, having sold their younger brother into slavery, although they had not been entirely successful in suppressing the memory of this great wickedness.

Whenever Joseph's name or the name of this country that he was sold to (Egypt) was mentioned, they could be seen casting cautious, guilty glances at one another. They had suppressed the memory enough that it was going to take a very harsh and prolonged treatment to elicit a confession.

Without the anxiety of physical deprivation they would never have gone down to Egypt.

They would have gone anywhere else if they had any hope of finding food elsewhere. But even having been forced to Egypt by the famine, they still would have never confessed their sin if God had not used an increasingly hard collection of devices to tighten His grip on them and force their confession to the surface.

The second of these devices, after the anxiety of physical deprivation, was the sting of tough treatment at the hand of Joseph. At the beginning, this tough treatment came merely in the form of words, but before long this was to become tough treatment of a physical sort. All of them were cast into prison and one of them, Simeon, was kept in prison.

Genesis 42 tells us that when the brothers came down to Egypt to buy grain, Joseph spoke harshly to them.

Genesis 42:6-8 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. 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." So Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.

What is so bad about him speaking harshly to them? It is just words, some might say. Material want as the result of famine does hurt us, but it does not hurt nearly as much as harsh words. We can starve to the point of severe malnutrition and recover, but words, harsh words that have been spoken to us, are never forgotten. Words cut deeper than any sword and we usually carry the wounds of words with us to the grave.

Criticism of another person is futile and harmful, because it puts the other person on the defensive and makes him want to justify himself. It wounds the other person's pride, hurts his sense of importance and provokes resentment. It is not only insults that hurt us, the truth hurts us as well, even when it is spoken kindly.

We all know how deeply truth, not to mention an injustice or an insult, cuts the mind and conscience. But words do work, which is one reason why God uses true words to unsettle us and awaken our consciences. Words are what Joseph, under God's leading, used to bring his brothers to their senses.

This was a matter involving a great wrong, it required a perceptive mind and very careful

handling. We must remember that these were hard men, very hard men. Years before this, when Joseph was just a boy, they had deceived the Shechemites who had defiled their sister Dinah. They massacred the entire village and their father said that they had made them a stench to the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

Reuben had dishonored his father by sleeping with his father's concubine, Bilhah. Judah had gone into his daughter-in-law, Tamar, making her a prostitute, and had gotten her pregnant. All the brothers together had sold Joseph into slavery.

Obviously these were not men a person could treat gently. It took a vigorous shaking from the prime minister of Egypt to unsettle them and this is what God used. Besides there is also the matter of Joseph being used as God's instrument. He had been honored more than once as a prophet of God, and God spoke to him, guided him, protected him, kept him from sin, and he was not left to his own devices now. He was acting as God's agent in awakening their consciences. His words were God's voice to them. This is probably what we are to understand by the reminder of Joseph's dream about the brothers.

Genesis 42:9 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!"

Now more than 22 years before this, when Joseph had been just a boy, he had dreamed that he and his brothers had been in the field binding grain when suddenly a sheaf rose and had stood upright and theirs gathered together and bowed down to it. Again, he dreamed that the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed to him. This dream was fulfilled for the first time on this occasion as we are told in verse 6.

Genesis 42:6 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.

When Joseph saw them bowing, he remembered his dream. Could that have been an accident? Could he have remembered his dream and not been reminded that the hand of God was in this business and would be until the end? If Joseph was left to himself he would have revealed his identity in a moment, but he was restrained by God who was using him for the salvation of his brothers.

It was God that brought the dreams to his remembrance. It is not a common occurrence and it is not mere casual conscience. Joseph probably recognized God in this and immediately perceived that this affair of his brothers coming to him was God's doing.

God is here, in this situation, and He therefore must regulate it and fix the time and manner of discovery. Without God, he would have immediately confronted them and been glad to see them, but God restrained him and he is no doubt consciously in God's hands, even though he desperately wanted to reveal himself to his brothers.

Although we are not given all the details we would like in Genesis 37, it is not unreasonable to think that when Joseph's brothers saw him coming toward them, in his envied tunic, they probably would have rushed at him, accusing him of having come to spy out their corrupt behavior and report on them to their father those twenty-two years ago.

We are not told that they did this, but it is reasonable to think that they may have done so, and if they did, it would explain why Joseph immediately thought of accusing them of the same thing in Genesis 42:14.

Genesis 42:9 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!"

Genesis 42:14 But Joseph said to them, "It is as I spoke to you, saying, 'You are spies!'

So many years earlier, if the brothers had accused Joseph of being a spy for their father, the boy would have certainly protested that he was not a spy but that he was only concerned for their welfare, the same things that the brothers were forced to say later.

Genesis 42:10-12 And they said to him, "No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. We are all one man's sons; we are honest men; your servants are not spies." But he said to them, "No, but you have come to see the nakedness of the land."

So to carry the parallel a bit further, it is clear that Joseph's being cast into the pit earlier in the story, has a parallel with him putting his brothers into prison, here in the second

part of the story.

Genesis 42:15-17 In this manner you shall be tested: By the life of Pharaoh, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. 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!" So he put them all together in prison three days.

This approach to the brothers, on Joseph's part, would have made a powerful appeal to the consciences. It is shortly after their imprisonment that the brothers confessed their sin openly for the first time, perhaps, themselves suggesting, a parallel.

Genesis 42:21 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."

So if Joseph was reenacting the scene at the pit, perhaps even repeating the words they had hurled at him, which had been indelibly etched in his memory, then it is understandable that the brothers had begun to come around at this point.

Joseph's words were not an unbridled outpouring of abuse or cruelty, they were carefully calculated words that proved effective in bringing the brothers to a necessary confession of their sin. That is why we must never resent or resist the tough treatment that God sometimes gives out.

As we study His Word or hear it preached, God hates sin. Of this there is no doubt. Therefore the Word of God, which reflects His holy character, customarily exposes our sin and calls for repentance on a regular basis. The Bible contains great comfort and promises too, but the comfort and promises are for those that confess their sins, obey God, and pursue righteousness.

Now what happens when a person with a sin-hardened conscience has his sin revealed? First there is a trickle of recognition of wrongdoing. But as God begins to open his mind the trickle becomes a torrent of remorse and confession—if he answers that call.

This was beginning to happen with Joseph's ten brothers. They had come to Egypt out

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of sheer necessity remembering only what they had done collectively for their brother. And dreading the possibility that they might meet in some dark hangout of slaves, still they were hardened men. It was only as God added the harsh Joseph, whom they did not recognize, to the pain of material want that the trickle of confession began. They said in verse 13:

Genesis 42:13 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.”

It is interesting that they stated, “and one is no more.” They meant that as far as they knew Joseph was probably dead, yet they felt compelled to mention him as their brother. Earlier when he had approached them, while they were with the sheep of Dothan, he had been “that dreamer” and now he was “our brother” and even “the boy.”

In this part of the story, the guilty memory of the brothers become an open confession for the first time.

Genesis 42:21-22 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.” 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.”

What did God use to bring about this acceleration of conscience and confession? He had used the pain of material want to bring the ten brothers to Egypt, where they were particularly vulnerable to God's prodding. Benjamin had remained with his father. God had used Joseph's harsh words to puncture their carefully constructed defenses and the words had begun to get through.

Now God uses solitude or physical imprisonment to set them apart from life's incessant trivial demands and give them time to awake to His displeasure. Let us go back to verse 17.

Genesis 42:17-18 So he [Joseph] put them all together in prison three days. Then Joseph said to them the third day, “Do this and live, for I fear God:

Solitude is a valuable gift of God even when there is no particular great sin to be exposed. In solitude people meet God. One of the reasons for the shallowness of much of our modern church life is that we have so little solitude.

Today, cell phones are one of the worst destroyers of solitude. The more a person uses his phone, the ruder, more dangerous, and annoying he becomes. One person who protested against material distractions was A. W. Tozer. He expressed his concerns in a book entitled *The Pursuit of God*.

Tozer wrote: "Possessions are one thing that keep us from God." He also says, "There can be no doubt that this possessive clinging to things is one of the most harmful habits in life. Because it is so natural it is rarely recognized for the evil that it is; but its outworkings are tragic."

Possessions and things are not the only things that keep us from God. The frantic, busy pace of our lives keep us from God as well. The Christian life and our relationship with God must be worked at and that takes time.

Tozer continued in his book to write: "The idea of cultivation and exercise, so dear to the saints of old, now has no place in our total religious picture. It is too slow, too common. We now demand glamor and fast flowing dramatic action. A generation of Christians reared among push buttons and automated machines is impatient of slower and less direct methods of reaching their goals. We have been trying to apply machine age methods to our relations with God. We read our chapter, we have our short devotions, and rush away hoping to make up of our deep inward bankruptcy. The tragic result of this spirit are all about us—shallow lives, hallowed religious philosophies, the preponderance of the element of fun in gospel meetings, the glorification of men, trust in religious externalizes, quasi religious fellowships, salesmanship methods, and the mistaking of dynamic personality for the power of the Spirit. These and such as these are the symptoms of an evil disease, a deep and serious malady of the soul."

I will continue with another quote from Tozer's book here. "Solitude is necessary for Christian life and growth under any circumstances. To grow we must spend time with God, we must escape from our slavery to things, we must set aside from the busyness of everyday life. But if this is true for everyone in every spiritual state, it is certainly true of one who is cherishing some distant unconfessed sin and who is hoping that God has forgotten about it. With such a soul, God will at first deal gently. He will bring want or tough treatment, but then if these alone do not unearth the fault and lead to confession, God will frequently shut the person up from normal activities, perhaps through sickness, or the loss of a job and reach him or her there."

Now we are introduced to the brothers' thoughts after Joseph had released them from three days in prison and had begun to deal with them again. Although their changing attitudes emerged as a response to his prodding, no doubt they merely reflect what they had already been building in their minds during the days of confinement. God was at work, therefore the ice of the rebellion was melting and the crime of which they were guilty was beginning to work its way toward the surface.

The first thing solitude did was to awaken and intensify the guilt. Now awaken may not be the perfect word for what was happening, since the brothers seemed to have had some awareness of their guilt throughout the story. They had done their best to put their guilt to sleep, but it was this "dozing guilt" that was now being jarred into consciousness.

Furthermore it was being intensified by the brothers' dire circumstances. It was bad enough that they had been harshly received by Joseph and placed in prison, but then, after three days had passed, they had been released and discovered that the Prime Minister was confronting them with an even more painful dilemma. He was letting them go home but requiring them to leave one of their number behind as a guarantee that they would return with their youngest brother Benjamin, as he had requested. So Joseph said in verse 19:

Genesis 42:19-20 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. And bring your youngest brother to me; so your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they did so.

Now what an understatement that is there. This is a delicate telling of what must have been a most traumatic moment in their lives. "All can go but one; one must stay." But who was to be that one? Who was to remain behind in the Prime Minister's prison, uncertain of his fate, of whether he will ever be released or see his homeland again?

We can envision the brothers looking at on another, especially at this point, with even greater anguish now than before when they were at home with Jacob. Should Reuben Stay? Reuben, who had dishonored his own father by sleeping with his father's concubine, Bilhah. Should Judah stay? Judah who committed incest with his daughter-in-law, Tamar. What about Simeon or Levi, who had taken such cruel and unjustifiable revenge on the unsuspecting citizens of Shechem?

Each of the ten had his own particular sins arising before him like ghosts of past days,

but over them all stood the one apparently damning sin, their vicious and utterly unjustified enslavement and possibly murder of their brother. No wonder they said, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother." No wonder Reuben exclaimed, "Did I not tell you to not sin against the boy, but you would not listen and now we must give an account for his blood."

Eventually they settled on Simeon to be the one who should remain behind. Perhaps Simeon even volunteered. But whether it was Simeon or another, each of them knew that he himself had every reason to be incarcerated. Solitude was doing its work and guilt was intensified.

Now the second thing solitude did in the lives of these men, was refresh their memories. As far as we know, there has never been a time previous to this, when the anguish of Jacob had been openly discussed between them. It is only when their deep guilt had already been forced to the surface, that they remember what we have long suspected, but had not been told was the case—mainly that Joseph had cried and pleaded for his life, but was not heeded. His brothers said, "We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen."

This is just one sentence and it treats the matter briefly, but this sentence makes clear that it was the details of the attack on Joseph and his anguished response that came back to them on this occasion. In the broadest sense of course, they had always remembered what they had done, but it came back so vividly on this occasion.

Now there was never a moment when they had been able to forget it entirely, but now, in silence and time to recollect Joseph's stricken face, those copious fears, that frightened and reproachful final glance, came vividly to their minds and struck them inwardly. Bitter memory of what was, is what makes memories so effective in God's hands. It is not just recollection of sin in general that is painful, but the vivid recalling of the specific details of sin, and in Satan's case the recalling of what he was before his rebellion.

All of us have such disgraceful incidents in our pasts, and it is the detail of these that come to our minds as God works upon us during our moments of solitude. Thankfully we are able to put them behind us because we are able to receive God's forgiveness upon genuine repentance. But still occasionally we are reminded of them.

The third thing solitude did for these guilty brothers of Joseph's was to cause them to reason spiritually. They were not godly men and probably not even converted men before the events of these chapters. They did not reason spiritually. They thought as

most worldly people do, mainly that this is a mechanical world and God does not exist, or at least that He does not intervene here. It is such a world where it is every man for himself. They say, "Who is to say that I've sinned? Who has the right to hold me to an accounting?" Then God intervened and suddenly the brothers changed their tune.

Genesis 42:21-24 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." 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." But they did not know that Joseph understood them, for he spoke to them through an interpreter. And he turned himself away from them and wept. Then he returned to them again, and talked with them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes.

They imagined that they were in an impersonal and immoral universe, but now, with their sin before them, they realize that the universe is moral after all because it is God's universe, and every sin must and will have a reckoning.

Now let me say at this point that it does not necessarily follow that every calamity of life is directly linked to some act of sin on our part. Job's councilors wanted to explain his calamity by some previous great act of sin, but they were wrong. Christ's disciples reasoned the same way when they noticed the man that had been born blind.

John 9:2-3 And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.

So Jesus replied that although this is a moral universe, the facts are not always easy to explain. Calamity is not always proof of past sin. Still, if calamity has come to your life and God has used it or solitude or whatever to bring the memory of your wrongdoings to mind, you know that you cannot escape the moral consciences of your sin by objections which deaden our consciences.

Never mind that some suffer innocently and never mind that God works in some suffering merely to bring Himself glory, that is not your case. You see the connection, you know you are guilty, and you and I know that God is not letting us escape

unscathed. He is pounding us to bring us to repentance, and it works.

I am talking about the effects of solitude to encourage spiritual reasoning because God uses solitude to bring us to our senses. He reminds us of the connection between sin and its consequences. This is not the only way that God causes us to reason spiritually. He causes us to reason about salvation also.

Isaiah 1:18 “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

I am sure that, as Joseph's brothers thought about their past sins, those sins rose up before them like a horrible, blood-red mass. They saw no hope of cleansing, they saw only the terrible retribution for the wrongdoing. It is the retribution we will see if we remain unrepentant. Sin means death but God, who brought the brothers together to see this spiritual connection, continued to work in them so that in time they freely confessed their sins and became revered fathers of the tribes of Israel. Judah, who was among the worst, was one through whom the Savior came.

Turn please to I Corinthians 4. We find, in this story of Joseph and his brothers, that God uses deprivation, tough treatment, and solitude to stimulate the brothers' consciences. Initially, when Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, not much good could be said of their consciences. Their consciences did not serve them well. If their consciences were to guide them, they would never have repented. The apostle Paul shows that the conscience is not the ultimate standard of moral goodness.

I Corinthians 4:4-5 For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.

Paul's' statement there, “For I know nothing against myself,” is basically the same thing as saying my conscience is not bothering me. Paul is teaching an important lesson here. One of the essential lessons of God's way of life is not to pass a harsh opinion on the conduct of anyone since there are so many things that go to make up his character that we cannot know. So there are many secret failings and motives which are all concealed from us. Our own conscience may not bother us, but that does not mean that

we are sinless.

So if we cannot see our own secret faults, how can we accurately see the faults of others to judge them? It is impossible. Joseph's brothers did not consider this because of their intense jealousy that blinded them and silenced their consciences.

Paul speaks of the hidden things of darkness. These are the secret things of the heart which have been hidden, as it were, in darkness. He does not refer to the deeds of the night, or those things that were performed in the secret places of idolatry, but of the secret designs of the heart. For Joseph's brothers, their motivation came from this very place—the intentions of their heart.

Please turn to Romans 2. According to both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, a good conscience must be formed by the will of God. A person's inner awareness of conforming to the will of God, or departing from it, results in either a sense of approval or condemnation.

The law given to Israel was inscribed on the hearts of believers so the sensitized conscience is able to discern God's judgment against sin. This is what happened to Joseph's brothers. They were taught the will of God by their father Jacob, however they did not take it seriously and they hardened their consciences.

But now God awakened their consciences with His devices: deprivation, though treatment and solitude and their consciences began to really bother them. So Paul tells us that Israelite and Gentile alike have consciences that bother them, but Israelites have been given a better foundation and accessibility to the right way to live.

Romans 2:14-15 For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.

Paul uses this word conscience here to mean the judgment of the mind respecting right and wrong, or the judgment which the mind passes on the morality or the immorality or its own actions, when it instantly approves or condemns them. Now it has usually been termed the moral sense. Its design is to be an attendant witness of a person's conduct; to compel him to judge his own doings and thus to motivate him to accomplish virtuous deeds; to give comfort and peace when he does right; to differ him from evil actions by

making him, whether he will or not, his own executioner.

By nature, every man approves or condemns his own actions thus compelling him to pronounce judgment on the moral character of his own moral conduct. Conscience may be enlightened or unenlightened and its use may be greatly perverted by false opinions. Its authority is not to communicate any new truth, it is simply to express judgment and to impart pleasure or inflict pain for a man's own good or evil conduct.

Paul's point does not say that conscience revealed any truth or any knowledge of duty to the Gentiles, but the fact that they exercised it proved that they had a knowledge of the law of God, which everyone does.

Conscience is an important part of the spirit in man and human nature, but it is not an absolute trustworthy indicator of what is right. One's conscience can be good and clear, but it can also be guilty, corrupt, weak, and seared.

We must trust Jesus Christ so that His blood might cleanse our consciences.

Hebrews 9:14 How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

So the blood of Christ enables our conscience to begin to be cleansed, but it does not stop there. The converted person must cleanse his conscience to begin to serve the Great God with a true heart.

Hebrews 10:22 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.

We must work to maintain pure consciences. We also must be careful not to encourage others to act against their consciences. To act contrary to the urging of one's conscience is wrong, because actions that go against the conscience cannot arise out of faith and that which is not from faith is sin.