

## How God Deals With Conscience (Part Two)

The Consciences of Joseph's Brothers, Elijah and Elisha

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In my previous sermon, we looked at the consciences of Joseph's brothers, who sold Joseph into slavery and he was taken to Egypt. The story of Joseph and his brothers is found beginning in Genesis 37, but this matter of conscience is not dealt with until Genesis 42.

How does God deal with the conscience? In a certain sense, the story in Genesis ceases to be merely Joseph's story. In Genesis 42 it becomes largely the story of Joseph's ten brothers, showing how God works through many devices to awaken their nearly dead consciences, bringing them to repentance and cleansing.

As I mentioned before, we do not know much of the state of their hearts in the long years leading up to the this chapter, but they had been guilty of great wickedness and they never mentioned God with any conviction. It is safe to say that at this point they were unconverted men. It was only through God, working on their consciences, that they were turned around to respect and honor Him eventually in their lives.

As I mentioned before, humans can put their consciences into a deep sleep so that it will not bother them anymore. But as we continue in this chapter we cannot really sense that the consciences of Joseph's brothers were totally subdued. Their consciences may have been injured or slumbering maybe, but certainly not dead.

We will pick up the story in the middle of the interrogation by Joseph, through an interpreter of his brothers, who had just found out that they have to leave one brother behind in Egypt.

**Genesis 42:24** And he [Joseph] 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.

In the first half of that verse we are told, that for the first time, Joseph began to break down in the presence of his brothers and weep. He hid it well, but still he was in close proximity to them. It was because of his great love for them, even after what they had done to him some 20 odd years before.

His weeping related to God's work in bringing them to a confession of sin which they had made to one another and which Joseph had heard, though they did not know that he had understood them.

In the second half of verse 24, we are told of an entirely different action than that first half. Joseph had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes. The significance of this combination of ideas is that the brothers were able to see one act, but not the other. Seeing only one had an entirely wrong impression of this Egyptian ruler.

Now when Joseph wept, he turned away from them so that they could not see his tears. The time for him to reveal himself as their brother had not yet come. God had much more work to do through Joseph, in bringing his brothers to the proper attitude.

Simeon, on the other hand, was bound before their eyes. To the guilt-stricken brothers this sight would be exceedingly painful, almost in the same category as Zedekiah's seeing the murder of his sons just before his eyes were put out by Nebuchadnezzar. It was very traumatic in both cases, and for these brothers it was traumatic to see their brother, Simeon, taken away in chains, bound, and put in prison until they were to return.

Now the brothers would have judged Joseph to be harsh, vindictive, and unfeeling at that point, still not knowing the whole story. But little did they know that beneath his rough ways, intended for their good, was a heart filled with the most compassionate love for them that they could imagine. But they could not see this. So their view of this added to the way their consciences were working at this time. They did not have the whole story.

It is often that way in our relationship with God. Sin brings God's harsh treatment and we see only the harsh treatment. We do not see that even this flows from God's love for us. We do not see that God's love and discipline are complementary. They combine to produce good as an end result in our lives, but all we see in a trial is how we feel we are being treated harshly by God or even ask why He does not intervene on our behalf.

As we progress through this chapter, we are going to see proof of God's presence become more noticeable.

**Genesis 42:25-28** Then Joseph gave a command to fill their sacks with grain, to restore every man's money to his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. Thus he did for them. So they loaded their donkeys with the grain and departed from there. But as one of them opened his sack to give

his donkey feed at the encampment, he saw his money; and there it was, in the mouth of his sack. So he said to his brothers [and he probably had a great sinking feeling when he said this], "My money has been restored, and there it is, in my sack!" Then their hearts failed them [sank, fell, or dropped] and they were afraid, saying to one another, "What is this that God has done to us?"

In this period of history, the capitol of Egypt was at Memphis, about ten miles south of the present city of Cairo, and Jacob was presumably still living in Hebron. The distance between these places was about two hundred and fifty miles, so it was quite a journey. Travel would have taken them about three weeks. So this must have been a long, difficult journey for the nine remaining brothers.

Now on the one hand, they must have been experiencing a measure of relief. They had been in danger of their lives and in prison, but now they had been released and were on their way home. On the other hand, they were returning without Simeon who was required to remain in the prime minister's prison, and how would they explain Simeon's incarceration to their father Jacob? In addition, they had been pounded by God to the point at which they had actually confessed to one another their sin of selling Joseph into slavery.

The brothers must have been relieved, yet anxious; grateful, yet troubled. They did not need another shock, another unsettling circumstance, yet this is what they received from God as He continued to work in softening their consciences.

Before these men started home, the story tells us that Joseph caused each man's silver to be returned to him in one of his purchases of grain. In addition, he gave them provisions for their journey. The use of these provisions would have kept them from opening their sacks until they were well on their way.

But at last, for some reason or another, maybe because the traveling provisions ran short, one of the brothers opened his sack and discovered the money Joseph had returned and what anxiety he felt at that time. "My silver had been returned, here it is in my sack!" he said to the others. This caused their hearts to sink and they turned to one another fearfully. "What is this that God has done to us," they asked.

This is the first time in the entire story, beginning with the birth of the first of the sons of Jacob in chapter 29, that any of Joseph's brothers is said to have mentioned God. In contrast, as we have seen, Joseph spoke of God constantly. There is hardly a sentence

that he expresses that does not have the name of God in it, but not so with his brothers. Not once, in their whole story, until now, have they even spoken the word of God and, now significantly, as the hand of God tightens around them, they exclaim in anguish, "what is this that God has done to us?"

Now this statement is such a significant breakthrough in these men's lives that it is worth examining in detail. I want to ask two questions here. First, what do the brothers mean by this question? A person might think that the answer is obvious. The silver had been returned and the circumstance arose that might make them be accused of cheating the ruler of Egypt. Or one might think that they might have said: "what is God trying to accomplish by allowing us to fall into such questionably and dangerous circumstances?" Or even, "why is God allowing us to fall into these circumstances?"

Many of us have asked these same questions when we have had things go wrong in our lives. Granted although these questions may be valid, but what the brothers are really saying is not so much a question, though it is phrased that way, but rather a statement. For the first time they are acknowledging that God is controlling a specific important circumstance in their lives, which they have never noticed or realized prior to this.

What they mean is, God has done this; God is not forgetful of our sins as we had thought; God has seen it, and He remembers it; God is intervening powerfully and directly in our lives. That is a far cry to the attitude they had before toward God which was just a casual statement that we often hear people make, but they do not really believe that God is really active in their life. These men finally came to the point of realizing that.

What makes this so significant and relevant to us is that the circumstance in which they referred was no miracle. When we are far from God and arrogantly think that God should intervene in our lives to do something we want, we genuinely have a miracle in mind, or at the very least we want God to work contrary to the normal course of events.

Finding their money in their sacks was no miracle. We know how it happened. Joseph caused it to be put there and even though his brothers did not know how the money was returned, they certainly did not think that it was a miracle. They did not understand it, but the money got there somehow through some mistake perhaps.

What bothered them was not the miraculous, but rather the providential nature of the event. It could have been the most insignificant of circumstances, but it was not insignificant to them. However small it was, it was proof that God was present in their circumstances and that He was going to demand a reckoning for their sin regarding

Joseph.

That is what God had intended when He put that thought in Joseph's mind, it was for them to come to this realization. When God works with troubled or convicted people, the people often stress some small details as evidence of God's working with them. Looked at coldly, such circumstances are nearly always explainable. An unbeliever would dismiss them as mere coincidences or accidents, but we must not think like this. To some other person, they may well have appeared as accidents or as nothing, but they are the touch of God's hand to the one under conviction.

In speaking of them, the person is acknowledging that God is working in their life and is accomplishing more than he can see by the circumstances. "What is this that God has done to us?" That is what we should be asking ourselves as circumstances go awry, or we feel that we do not have any control.

The second question I want to ask is this: What does the brothers' statement concerning God signify? The answer was that they were coming to grips with the true God at last. In other words, their statement does not only mean that they were recognizing that God was doing something to them, as in "what is this (emphasis on "this") that God has done to us?" But they were recognizing that it was God who was doing. "What is this that God (emphasis on "God") has done to us?" is how they were viewing it.

I pointed out that this is the first moment in the story that any of the brothers refers to God. I do not mean to suggest however that, in a literal fact, there was never an occasion which any one of them ever use God's name. Though it is not recorded for us, I am sure that there were hundreds, or even thousands of times when one or the other of the brothers referred to the name of God. After all they were the sons of Jacob in Hebron, the God of Jacob was a household word.

He was the One who had brought out Abraham, their great-grandfather, out of Ur. He was the One who had appeared to their father in Bethel and had wrestled him at Jabbok. They knew all about God, or at least you would certainly think so. Or you could say, in a sense, that they were raised 'in the church.' They were raised in Jacob's household, so they knew *of* God, however they did not recognize Him, did they?

They used the word 'God,' but it did not mean any more to them than the words: nature; fate; destiny, or happenstance. God was not real to them until this point. They had been living their lives as if God did not exist, or at least did not exist for them personally. So when they say, "what is this thing that God (emphasis on "God") has done for us?" they were acknowledging the bearing of the true God on their lives for the very first time.

There is another point that also comes from these verses, and it concerns grace. Thus far in the story of God's intervention in the lives of Joseph's brothers to bring them to repentance have all had a rough edge around them. They have issued from grace since they have been intended for good in the brother's lives, but still they had not been the kind of things that we would willingly choose for ourselves: the pain of material want, anxiety of deprivation, the pain of harsh treatment, solitude, or imprisonment. None of us would choose those things.

Here, for the first time, in the case of the money being returned to the brothers' sacks, we have something that is purely gracious that has no rough edges around it at all. It was a kind action.

Joseph simply wanted to give their money back. As far as we can tell, he had no ulterior motive, until the situation in chapter 44, when his cup is hidden in Benjamin's sack. Joseph does not send soldiers after the brothers, in fact he never mentions the money again, and his steward even assures the brothers later that he received their payment and they are not to worry about it.

Now it is difficult for the unconverted to fathom grace. In Leviticus 26, there is a verse that speaks of the slightness of that which terrifies the wicked. I find this a very interesting verse.

**Leviticus 26:36** 'And as for those of you who are left [speaking to the remnant], I will send faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies; the sound of a shaken leaf shall cause them to flee; they shall flee as though fleeing from a sword, and they shall fall when no one pursues.

That is being terrified at the drop of a pin or less. Proverbs 28:1 goes a step further showing that the guilty person will sometimes flee from nothing.

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

Now we have heard about fear over the years. Perfect love casts off fear, or we could say obedience to God casts out fear, but wickedness here, is shown to terrify the wicked. They are looking over their shoulder throughout life and they are afraid at the drop of a hat.

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Now in Genesis 42, we have the ultimate extension of this principle. Fear, not merely of a trivial thing or of nothing at all, but rather a fear of what is good. God was doing good to these brothers, returning their money, but because they were not yet in a right relationship to Him, they feared even His goodness and turned to each other trembling.

Even so, God was leading by this gracious act, as well as by the other circumstances, and it was a case of Romans 2:4, which asks the unrighteous:

**Romans 2:4** Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?

How is God's kindness leading? Well the fact that the money was returned in their sacks after all the other circumstances in their journey to Egypt led the nine brothers to the fullest, most open dealings with their aged father Jacob to date. Almost all the commentators note how honest and forthright these men were in telling their father Jacob what had happened in Egypt.

But this is not quite accurate, since they said nothing about how they came to confess their sin in regard to Joseph during their days in solitude. They kept that one thing from Jacob at this time.

**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."

But even though they did not fully level with Jacob, though they would do so in time as God worked on their conscience, they nevertheless did give an account that shows progress in their attitudes.

**Genesis 42:29-32** Then they went to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan and told him all that had happened to them, saying: "The man who is lord of the land spoke roughly to us, and took us for spies of the country. But we said to him, 'We are honest men; we are not spies. We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is with our father this day in the land of Canaan.'

They did not tell of their sins regarding Joseph, but neither did they hide the problem that they had gotten themselves into regarding Simeon and Benjamin.

**Genesis 42:33-35** Then the man, the lord of the country, said to us, “By this I will know that you are honest men: Leave one of your brothers here with me, take food for the famine of your households, and be gone. And bring your youngest brother to me [that is Benjamin]; so I shall know that you are not spies, but that you are honest men. I will grant your brother to you, and you may trade in the land.” Then it happened as they emptied their sacks, that surprisingly each man’s bundle of money was in his sack; and when they and their father saw the bundles of money, they were afraid.

Here God had blessed them with this situation, but the brothers were afraid because they knew that there was something connected to it. They knew that they were guilty of what they did to Joseph and that God was going to get them for that, so to speak. Their father also saw it, because hearing the story, he realized that the prime minister of Egypt, Joseph, whom he did not know was Joseph at the time, would be after them claiming that they stole it.

The brothers were not quite fully honest men yet, but they were learning to be. They were beginning to learn what it was like to live by truth, not lies; by honesty rather than deceit.

Now another point in which we see progress comes at the end of the chapter. The brothers explain to Jacob that they would be unable to go back to Egypt without Benjamin, and Jacob protested. For a time he would refuse to let Benjamin go, then Reuben intervened pledging his own sons for the safety of Benjamin.

**Genesis 42:37** Then Reuben spoke to his father, saying, “Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you.”

These were dramatic and drastic statements that they were making and you wonder at this time, being unconverted men, if they really knew what they were promising before God, so to speak.

Earlier Reuben had served himself, no one else's happiness, not even his father's, was allowed to intrude. Now he put himself and his own family on the line regarding



Benjamin. So we are seeing a change in his character here.

Now let me interject a thought here. Since I cannot see your heart and you cannot see mine, therefore I do not know what it conceals and you do not know what mine conceals. I do not know whether you are hiding an unconfessed sin, or whether God is working through the pain of material want with you; is working through the anxiety of deprivation, the pain of harsh judgment or solitude, the circumstantial proof of His presence, or bring some sin to light and lead you to a genuine repentance. I do not know how God is working in your life or how He is working with you personally, and I do not know what He is trying to bring about in your life—whether it be to build your character, or to correct you on something you have done.

We do not know what is happening in each other's lives, so how can we possibly judge one another? It is impossible. We are to judge sin, however, but we are not to condemn a person for what they are doing, because it is not our place.

If God is working or has worked in you, there will be confession and sin will be repudiated and you will be growing in an honest life marked by the highest commitment to truth. You will be thinking of and working for other people and their happiness rather than your own.

So we see that self-centeredness is something that dissipates and disappears as God works with us, whether it be to bless us or discipline us. Jesus Christ is like that and this is what He did for you. He did not come to be ministered to, but rather to minister and give His life for many. "Greater love has no one than this, than to give his life for his friends."

At this point I am going to shift gears in the theme here and go from the idea of the conscience and how God works with it, to an indirect issue linked to conscience. We come up on something else in the story here but it is indirectly related to conscience. Let us pick it up here in verse 36.

**Genesis 42:36-38** And Jacob their father said to them, "You have bereaved me: Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. All these things are against me." Then Reuben spoke to his father, saying, "Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you." But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is left alone. If any calamity should befall him along the way in which you go, then you would bring down my gray hair with sorrow to the grave."

It is a privilege to bear a good witness for God and a shame to those to fail to do so. A complaining witness is one we have probably all heard hundreds of times, whining and saying: "no one respects me, no one cares about me, everyone blames me and speaks ill of me." This is how we think when we are feeling sorry for ourselves, all of these things are against me. I do not think that there is person in this room who has not had that thought or something similar to that. It is in our human nature and it comes out when we are frustrated and when we cannot solve our own problems.

Jacob was feeling sorry for himself when his sons returned from Egypt reporting that they had been challenged by Egypt's prime minister. The prime minister was Joseph, of course, but the brothers did not know this and did not suspect his motives when he accused them of having come to Egypt to spy out the land.

He put Simeon in prison and demanded that when they returned they should return with Benjamin to prove that they were honest men. When Judah, Reuben, and the others told their father that they could not go back to Egypt unless Benjamin came with them, Jacob complained about this adverse turn of circumstances. It frustrated him because it was out of his control and there was nothing that he could do about it.

**Genesis 42:36** And Jacob their father said to them, "You have bereaved me: Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. All these things are against me."

The chapter concludes with Jacob holding out against what was to become a necessity. I think we are often like Jacob when we complain that everything is against us and we are just laughable in our situation.

Circumstances fail to treat us right, or someone says something less than complimentary. We are faced with a difficult decision and then suddenly we feel that nothing has ever gone right for us in our entire life and we pout about it. That is human nature. We have all done it in various degrees.

Is that the kind of witness we are going to bear for God? Is this the way that we are going to disgrace the summons that He has given us? It is a question that we should all contemplate.

It should be evident, as we treat this brief parentheses in the story of God's working on the hardened consciences of Joseph's brothers, that I am going to hold up Jacob as the

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negative example. In this case I am going to say, do not be like him, but I say it respectfully because he was a man to be admired and a great hero of faith. However, in this case he was showing, as we all do at times, a lack of faith.

Before I do that, I want to show that although he was wrong when he said, “everything is against me,” he was nevertheless not entirely wrong in recognizing that in a sinful world such as ours, at least some things are against God's people. True they are not usually what we think of when we are despondent, but we feel that things are not working out for us. However, we should know that things really are, as Romans 8:28 points out:

**Romans 8:28** And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Although circumstances are controlled by God and used by Him for our benefit, we nevertheless do have enemies who seek our downfall. Otherwise we would not be warned about the fiery darts and need the shield of faith and the rest of the armor.

Now we speak generally of three of these: the world, the flesh, and Satan. The world is not for us; the flesh attacks us from within; and Satan would drag us down to wickedness, if he were able. These three opponents are not everything. We are to keep in mind that these are formidable and have a strong effect on us.

When we speak of the world, in a sense of being our spiritual opponent, we are not using the word in reference to the earth in the sense of the physical globe or even the people who inhabit the earth, as in the phrase “the whole world.” We are using it to refer to the world system Jesus referred to when He said,

**John 15:19** If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

This is what we are to expect from the world. The world is always competing against itself, winning through intimidation and looking out for number one, and otherwise operating according to its own goals and values rather than the values of God. This is why we are told to come out of the world. The world is always trying to compel Christians to be like it and that is why the apostle Paul wrote,

**Romans 12:2** And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by

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the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

If you want to come *out* of the world and if you do not want to be *of* the world, learn what God's will is. It begins with the inspired written Word of God that we have right in front of us.

The flesh is what we carry about in ourselves. Flesh does not refer to the soft material that covers our bones and is nourished by the circulation of blood anymore than world refers merely to the earth globe. The sense in which we are using the word here and in which the Bible uses it when it speaks of the sins of the flesh. Flesh means the earthly nature apart from divine influence, apart from the intervention of grace, and the fleshly nature is completely ready to sin and is rebellious against God. Of this Paul writes saying:

**Galatians 5:19-21** Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness [this refers to modesty], idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

That is a terrifying statement. Joseph's brothers were just such men prior to all of this. I told you before all the things that they had done. Joseph's brothers were men of the world and they were being called and transformed.

Now the third of the three classic opponents of a Christian is Satan. Peter describes him as a roaring lion, meaning that he is seeking something to devour, as it says.

**I Peter 5:8-9** Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. [This part is very important here.] Resist him [to do that you have to be conscience of him. He is very powerful still.], steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

We are not alone, our brotherhood in the world are going through the same types of things. We are all being tried, we are all receiving tests and trials. Some of the darts that

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are thrown at us are small and some are large, but they are there and we are told to conscientiously resist Satan.

Satan is such an imposing enemy. He has already been introduced to us in Genesis in the story of the serpent's temptation of Eve and Adam. It is somewhat surprising that he has not been mentioned explicitly afterward in Genesis, however we are not to conclude from this that he is inactive. Satan was active in the growth of the debauchery and perhaps spiritualism and demon worship that preceded the Flood. No doubt he was at this point also actively opposing God's chosen people.

We must remember that God had said that He would send a Redeemer through the chosen line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but that He had not yet disclosed through which of the twelve sons of Jacob that redeemer would come. We do not find that out until Genesis 49.

Satan may have had a suspicion that Joseph was the one and therefore moved heaven and earth to persecute, corrupt, and if possible, do away with Joseph. In a matter of speaking, Satan already had the other ten brothers in his pocket because they were unconverted. It was easy for him to turn them against Joseph. Satan would have undoubtedly killed Joseph if God did not intervene to protect and eventually prosper the young man.

We learn later that the Messiah was not to come through Joseph or his sons, but rather through Judah, whom God was bring to faith through these incidents. Satan would never have suspected this hard secular, sensual man, Judah, but in the very next chapter it is Judah who leads the other brothers in putting himself on the line for Benjamin and we begin seeing his conversion.

Jacob said, if you recall, "everything is against me." He was not right in saying this as I mentioned before, but he would have been right if he had acknowledged these three enemies: Satan, who was no doubt seeking to destroy him as well as Joseph; the world, whose godless values and goals were a constant threat to all of this chosen family; and sins of his own fleshly nature.

So how could Jacob say such a thing? He was opposed by great enemies, but had he forgotten God? Had he entirely forgotten the one who had appeared to him in Bethel?

**Genesis 28:13-15** And behold, the Lord stood above it and said: "I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall

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be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.”

So God was there with Jacob and his family. He did not leave them but rather was working very closely with each one of them as He is doing with every one of us in God's church and our families.

This brings to mind that wonderful story of Elijah's successor, Elisha and the young man that was Elisha's servant. The story is set in a time of war in which the king of Aram had been fighting the king of Israel.

The Arameans were stronger and would have defeated Israel except for the fact that God had been revealing the plans of the king of Aram to Elisha, who had in turn been passing them on to Israel's commander. And when the Arameans laid a trap, God told Elisha, and he in turn told the king of Israel and the Hebrew armies went another way. This happened so often that the king of Aram suspected a traitor and summoned his officers to see who was disclosing his plans to the enemy. His officers told the truth.

**II Kings 6:12** And one of his servants said, “None, my lord, O king; but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom.”

That would terrify any king. When the king heard this he was determined to capture Elisha and thus stop him from conferring with the king of Israel. When he learned that he was at Dothan, the very same place where Joseph had been attacked by his brothers and thrown into the cistern, the king went to Dothan by night and surrounded the city. The next morning the servant of Elisha was terrified of what he saw. There he saw the Aramean armies. We can see him in panic mode, dropping the water jug, running up the path to the city, bursting through the gates, finding Elisha and then notice what he said:

**II Kings 6:15-16** And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” So he answered [Elisha was calm and said:], “Do not fear, for those who are with

us are more than those who are with them.”

At this point Elisha asked God to open the eyes of the servant and when God did so the young men saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. The end of the story shows how, when the armies of Aram began to move against Elisha, God struck the soldiers with blindness and Elisha led them in their blind state into the armed city of Samaria where they were captured by Israel's king.

What is it that surrounds us? Is it the world and all of its temptations and ensnarement? Have we allowed that? The flesh with its lusts? Satan with his malicious hatred and eternal enmity against God? It does not matter, because those that are with us are more than those who are with them.

One might complain in this way: “I'm in a severe trial and really struggling, no one respects what I have to say, no one does anything for me, everyone blames me, and talks about me behind my back.” We do not see those who are on our side, but it does not matter, because God guarantees that those who are with us are more than those who are against us. The One who is above all and is on our side is alone sufficient, and if He is for us, who can be against us? Listen to Paul's encouragement regarding:

**Romans 8:32-39** He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: “For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” [That is the way we feel sometimes as those trials, one after another continue to hit us.] Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is not because of what we have done, but because of the grace of God and what He has done and how He views us as family.

I suspect at this point that Jacob might protest that he did not mean to say exactly what he said, and his protest was meant along slightly different lines. He had complained that everything was against him, but what he might have said is: "I didn't really mean that *everything* is against me, I know that God is for me and will probably work this all out somehow, although I can't see how He'll do it." Or perhaps that, "No other human beings are for me. I'm trying to do the right thing, but it's dreadfully hard. I feel so alone."

Have you ever said that or had that kind of mindset? Have you ever felt that you have seriously tried to serve God and have done so for many years, but it is difficult? Have you felt that you are the only one trying to hold the line at times? Have you felt that, although everything may not be against you, at least no one is standing with you or serving with you to share the burden? We have all had these feelings at one point or another.

I think these feelings are common to God's people, especially in times of stress. Elijah felt that way. He had been used by God in a magnificent way; he stood against the wickedness of King Ahab; he had been used by God to declare a rainless period of three years, then at the end of that time, he appeared suddenly to arrange a confrontation with the priest of Baal.

Now Elijah had the false priests build an altar to their god while he built a similar altar to the Lord of Hosts. There were to be stones, wood, and offerings, but no fire. The true God was to provide the fire. Elijah invited the priests of Baal to go first. They sang, chanted, and called for fire, but of course none came and Elijah taunted them.

**I Kings 18:27** And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened."

At last the prophets of Baal gave up and Elijah called on the Lord of Hosts and immediately fire came from heaven and consumed not only the sacrifice but also the wood, stones, and soil. It even evaporated the water in a trench around the sacrifice which Elijah had also constructed and filled. After this the prophets of Baal were killed and the period of drought had ended.

There are few greater stories of a victory over evil in Israel in the entire Old Testament. We would expect that the triumph would have left Elijah thankful and exhilarated, but this was not the case. Like so many of us at the end of some great struggle in our lives, Elijah felt let down and discouraged. Elijah arose, ran for his life, and fled into the



wilderness. What a sad sequel to the triumph on Mt. Carmel.

Elijah had forgotten Jezebel, who was not present herself on the mount, but Jezebel had received, with skeptical scorn, the reports from Mt. Carmel. The fire from heaven she looked at as a mere conjurer's trick; the rain following the prophet's prayer was a mere coincidence, and like all others who speak so glibly of coincidences, she never asked what power had made the two events coincide.

She felt utter contempt for the cowards who had stood by while her prophets were butchered by a madman, and in a passionate fury she declared that she was not a traitor who forsakes the gods of her fathers at the command of a wild man, and if no one else had the courage to withstand Elijah, she would do it herself. So the letter was sent which made the prophet Elijah flee. Ahab and his evil wife, Jezebel, threatened to kill him for having killed the false priests and Elijah had to run for his life.

Are we not all in danger of repeating Elijah's mistake and forgetting our chief adversary? We struggle with the opposing forces that we can see but we forget unseen arrays of principalities and powers whose hostility is relentless, who have great deadly skills, and subtlety wait for our unguarded moments. He knows exactly what our weakness are.

Elijah had taken his eyes off of God and when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life. That is the way it is worded. The next time we hear about him in the story, he is in a cave in Mt. Horeb in Sinai, where he had fled for his life. In chapter 19, Elijah prayed to God and said:

**I Kings 19:10** So he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."

He repeats the same self pitying complaint in verse 14.

**I Kings 19:14** And he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."

He says it twice here. He was a man of God, a man who had been an instrument in

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performing great visual miracles, and yet he had run for his life and felt that he was the only one left. It is impossible for us to justify his flight. He acted in a panic, and there was no waiting for God's divine guidance. A moment's reflection would have changed the whole aspect of affairs. "Jezebel may rage, but the Eternal lives." That is all that he would have had to remember.

No, I am not trying to minimize him there, he is to be greatly respected. He was a wonderful and a godly man, but what he did, what we *all* do at times, is lacked faith. So their struggle is also our struggle.

When the Lord spoke to Daniel the prophet, he said, "Oh man greatly beloved, fear not; peace be to you; be strong; yes be strong." So when he spoke to me I was strengthened and said "let my Lord speak for You have strengthened me." It goes on and on of how God strengthened His people.

One encouragement such as this and it would have leaped the prophet Elijah's faith, his old courage would have returned, and instead of fleeing from Jezebel, he might have driven Jezebel out of the kingdom, but why were his eyes off of God? To a certain extent, unconsciously, his eyes were upon himself. Is not that usually our problem as well?

**I Kings 19:4** But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!"

Had he thought that he was better than his fathers? Had he been uplifted at the success God had given him? Had he thought that the shouts of the people would have ended the conflict? We must not judge him unkindly not knowing his heart completely.

God's first care was to give him rest and sleep. Overwrought nerves, a tired brain, and physical exhaustion had much to do with Elijah's downward slide and that is something God takes into consideration in our lives as well. How many times have you been frustrated, for whatever reason, and immediately you lacked faith. So there are physical reasons for actually having a moment of decline, so to speak.

Now the meeting with Ahab, the preparation for the contest, the strain of the conflict itself with its tremendous output of faith and prayer, the excitement of the grim work of judgment, the fatigue of the long quick run to Jezreel, had left the prophet in a state of

physical tension and fatigue which nothing but calm, trustful confidence in God could have endured.

Much of the spiritual depression and lack of faith among Christians today is due to rush and over-strain, overwork and tiredness. After this Elijah was not left without a congenial friend and companion. Elisha was called from the plow to follow him and to minister to him because it is not good for man to be alone. That is a principle not only applicable to marriage, but to life in general.

Solitude, while a real means of grace, may easily become a means of agonizing temptation. In the case of Elijah, solitude brought him despair, but in the case of Joseph's brothers, solitude brought them to a point where their consciences could be used to wake them up to confess their sin against Joseph.

It is interesting to compare Elijah with Joseph's brothers, and how God used similar devices to bring about particular changes in each of them. God used famine, that is, the anxiety of deprivation or material want, to motivate Joseph's brothers to expose their sin. But He used the anxiety of deprivation to drive Elijah to despair so that he would know that God provides all of our needs.

God used the sting of tough treatment, beginning in the form of words, then to physical tough treatment, to motivate Joseph's brothers to admit their wickedness. But He used the same devices to drive Elijah to weakness so that he would know that God is our true strength.

God used solitude to set Joseph's brothers apart for His spiritual purpose, to call them to repentance. And Elijah was set apart also. However, the reason was to receive a specific responsibility to carry out. Solitude is a valuable gift of God even though there is no particularly great sin to be exposed. In solitude people are more inclined to meet God. There are times when solitude is helpful, as in our daily prayer, where we can focus only on the relationship with Him.

The solitude of Joseph's brothers melted the ice of their rebellion and the crime of which they were guilty was beginning to work its way to the surface. The solitude of Elijah while in the wilderness, melted the ice of Elijah's pride and the faithlessness of his complaining and his eventual state of humility could then be worked with and molded.

Just as Joseph's brothers needed God in Joseph, so also did Elijah need God in Elisha. Primarily and ultimately we need God's help as well, but we also need help from one another.

There is a lesson here for us today that we should greatly value our family and Christian fellowship. God has designed us and made us so that we need our family and spiritual brethren and there is no such thing as an independent Christian. If Elijah had Elisha at his right hand, he may not have forgotten God.

At this point God revealed that He had chosen to appoint another king to replace Ahab, Jehu the son of Nimshi, and he had chosen another man to help and succeed Elijah as Israel's prophet—Elisha, the son of Shaphat. Elijah was to anoint both of these roles and then God said,

**I Kings 19:18** Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

Elijah, in his despair, thought that Israel would be extinguished, but God assured Elijah that He had preserved a remnant, which gave Elijah hope that God would fulfill His saving promises in the future.

The seven thousand illustrates the concept of a remnant to be fulfilled by those who believe in Christ. In the apostle Paul's day, as well as in Elijah's day and today, a remnant of the elect believe in Christ because of God's grace and it is a relatively small flock.

**Romans 11:2-5** God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, “Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life”? But what does the divine response say to him? “I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.

**Romans 11:7** What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded.

The elect are a remnant, who, by the grace of God, have obtained grace, salvation, and spiritual strength.

Let me give you three general reasons Elijah had his spiritual setback. The first is that Elijah's physical strength and nervous energy were completely overtaxed. We are

fearfully and wonderfully made and our inner life is very sensitive to our outward conditions. It has been truly said that the most trivial causes, such as a heated room, a sunless day, want of exercise, or a northern aspect, can make all the difference between happiness and unhappiness, between faith and doubt, and between courage and decision.

The point is, do not let physical conditions cause spiritual setbacks for you. If you are tired and ready to drop, and your attitude is declining, you must rest or take the time to rebuild.

The second reason for Elijah's setbacks was that he was sensitive to his lonely position. "I alone am left." It has been said that some are born to loneliness and that it is the penalty of true greatness. At such a time the human spirit is likely to falter unless it is sustained by a heroic purpose and by an unfaltering of faith. The shadow of that loneliness of that darkness fell on Jesus Christ when He said,

**John 16:32-33** Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

The third reason Elijah had a spiritual setback is because he looked away from God to *circumstances*. Up until that moment Elijah had been motivated by a most splendid faith and goal, because he had never lost sight of God. By faith Moses endured seeing Him that is invisible.

**Hebrews 11:27** By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.

Faith always thrives when God occupies the whole vision and we must be careful to avoid looking at circumstances, though they may roll before us like the Red Sea and howl around us like a storm.

Circumstances, natural impossibilities, and difficulties are nothing in the estimation of the converted mind that is focused on God. All the solutions are there in God. Circumstances are like the small dust that settles on a scale and is not considered in the measurement of weight.

We may learn from this sad crisis in Elijah's history, the lesson of our own weakness and our dependence on God's grace. Often the most dangerous and perilous time for the converted person is after a time of great increase and blessing, either physical or spiritual; when he says to himself, "I stand strong on my own."

**I Corinthians 10:12-13** Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

Beware of taking any step without it being the will of God. Be careful not to follow your own will and do not lose yourself in the marshy swamps of self-confidence. Be careful not to take any serious or important steps unless you have prayed and possibly fasted about the decision to determine if it is God's will.

**Proverbs 3:6** In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.

**Psalms 84:5** Blessed is the man whose strength is in You [meaning God], whose heart is set on pilgrimage.

Beware of murmuring under trials. Each of us has or may yet have his day of trial, bereavement, disappointment, crushed hopes, or despair, fiery darts from which we least expect them. Now how are we to meet them? To give way to irritable, frightful anxiety?

**Psalms 6:4-9** Return, O Lord, deliver me! Oh, save me for Your mercies' sake! For in death there is no remembrance of You; in the grave who will give You thanks? I am weary with my groaning; all night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows old because of all my enemies. Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity; for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping. The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord will receive my prayer.

God still has work for each and every one of us to do and it is not for you, but for Him at His own appointed time, as He said to Hezekiah, "you shall die and not live." Thankfully

He has not said that to us.

If we have ever been guilty of stating such a rash prayer as that of Elijah's, "take away my life," let us be thankful God has not given us fulfillment on that wish. The ratification of our own desire would allow us to die unprepared.

Notice God's tenderhearted care for Elijah. I am going to give you seven of these here: 1) He allowed him to sleep. This was better than medicine, inward rebuke, or spiritual instruction at this time. 2) He fed him with food. 3) He made him receive angelic care; an angel touched him. 4) He allowed him to tell his grief. This is often the readiest relief. He stated his case and in doing so eased his mind and God allowed him to vent his frustration. 5) He revealed Himself in ways of an earthquake, wind, fire, and still small voice which were, in type, voices from God. 6) He told him good news. "I have reserved seven thousand in Israel." His sense of loneliness was thus removed. 7) He gave him more to do. Elijah was to anoint others by whom the Lord's purpose of chastisement and instruction should be carried on.

Today you may seem to be alone in your determination to live for God in this wicked and spiritually hostile world. You may believe that everything and everyone is against you, but this is not the case. You are not alone, God is with you. He alone is greater than any opponent that you may face. And in addition to God Himself, there are also thousands who have not and will not bow their knees down to the pagan gods of this culture.

But let us not forget Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers. The ongoing famine eventually forces Jacob back to Egypt with his son Benjamin. When the brothers return, they are unexpectedly invited to dine at Joseph's house, and taken by surprise. They suspect that this may be a ploy to enslave them because of the money in their sacks. They are still unconverted and they still need help in their calling.

The lavish meal prepared the way for Joseph's disclosure to his brothers which comes in the next chapter. The next time I speak we will continue to analyze more principles about how God deals with conscience from the story of Joseph and his brothers.