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WHEN YOUR CONSCIENCE SAYS "OW!"

Genesis 42:1-28

by

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June 29, 1997

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Genesis Lesson 70

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Armando Valladares spent two years being tortured in Cuban prisons as a political prisoner. Yet he maintained his faith in God and refused to grow bitter toward his persecutors. In his book, *Against All Hope* (cited in *Reader's Digest* [7/87, p. 213]) he writes,

Gen. Enyo Leyva, First Vice Minister of the Interior, came to see me in the hospital one day. He greeted me with a smile and said, "I think that book of yours exaggerates some things, Valladares."

I smiled right back. "It's not *my* book, General. It's *our* book. After all, your side furnished the plot."

He laughed. "That's good ... Well, now we're going to take you to a real hospital for treatment. You can't say we beat you or torture you now. Why don't you write a book about that?"

"I will, General, just as soon as the Revolution writes one of its own, telling how we were beaten, tortured and murdered"

The General didn't bat an eyelash. "Look," he said, "I'm two years younger than you are, but you look much younger. We couldn't have treated you so badly."

"The way I am *inside* has a lot to do with the way I look, General. It comes from having a clean conscience. You probably don't sleep as well as I do."

The General stopped smiling.

At that point, the General's conscience said, "Ow!" Everybody has

a conscience, that still, small voice inside us that is sometimes too loud for comfort. We can suppress it and try to ignore it. For a while it may seem to be dead and gone. But then something happens to reawaken it. The "faults alarm" goes off and it says, "Ow!"

The old advice, "Let your conscience be your guide" is only partly right. Certainly no one should violate his conscience, although we all have done so. But living by your conscience is not enough. The conscience must be shaped and nurtured by the Word of God, which reveals His holy standards of right and wrong. If we disregard the conscience long enough, or if we don't train it properly, it can be seared to the point that we can commit atrocious crimes without a twinge. When we suppress our guilty conscience, God has to awaken it to bring us to repentance so that we can share His holiness.

In Genesis 42, God is awakening the sleeping consciences of Joseph's brothers. They were a hard bunch. Years before, under the leadership of Simeon and Levi, they had deceived a village, slaughtered all the men and taken the women and children captive in retaliation for one man's violating their sister. Reuben, the oldest, had slept with his father's concubine. Judah had two sons so wicked that the Lord took their lives. He himself had gone in to his daughter-in-law, Tamar, thinking her to be a prostitute. All of the brothers, except Benjamin, had sold Joseph into slavery and then crushed their father's heart by deceiving him into thinking that his son was dead.

Now it's 22 years later. They've papered over their guilty consciences. Joseph was out of sight, out of mind. Life in Canaan was comfortable, although they were blending in with the paganism around them. To awaken the consciences of a tough bunch like this, God has to use some rather severe measures. The famine in Egypt extends into Canaan. Slowly their supply of grain dwindles to nothing. They're facing starvation. Jacob hears that there is grain in Egypt, so he sends his ten sons (minus Benjamin) down there to buy grain. In the process, their sleeping conscience

awakes. Their story shows us how

God uses severity and grace to awaken our consciences and bring us to repentance.

God gets pretty tough, and yet the whole process is shot through with His grace. We see, first, how ...

1. God uses pressure to awaken our consciences.

Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, so he started talking it up with his sons. But every time he brought up the subject, none of his sons would look him in the eye. They just stared at one another. Reuben looked at Simeon, Simeon glanced at Judah, Judah's eyes darted over to Levi. Jacob said, "Why are you staring at one another. Get down to Egypt and buy us some grain." For Jacob, Egypt was a neutral word. But for his sons, the word Egypt went off like a bomb in their guilty consciences. They could hear again the clink of the silver coins they received from the traders as they sold their brother into slavery. They could see him begging for his life as he was being dragged off. They remembered the terrible expression of horror on his face. *Egypt!* Donald Barnhouse says, "The word Egypt in their ears must have sounded like the word rope in the house of a man who has hanged himself" (*Genesis* [Zondervan], 2:187).

All this time they had promoted the lie that Joseph was dead. They had said it so many times that it just rolled off their lips. When they unknowingly talk to Joseph they say, "... we are honest men, ... twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more" (42:11, 13). They almost believed their own lie--but not quite. When a trip to Egypt was mentioned, they dreaded the possibility of passing by a gang of slaves and perhaps seeing the hollow eyes of their brother.

For 22 years these brothers had tried to silence their nagging

consciences. But when God applied the pressure of famine, coupled with the word "Egypt," the sleeping giants stirred. Time doesn't erase a guilty conscience. You can brush your sin under the rug and hope that enough years will take care of it. But one day, perhaps years later, God will apply some sort of pressure in your life and your conscience will stir. Maybe it will be a single word, spoken inadvertently by someone. "Egypt!" Your sin flashes as vividly in your mind as if it was yesterday.

But God has more tools to stir our sleeping consciences:

2. God uses reciprocal treatment to awaken our consciences.

F. B. Meyer (*Joseph* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 72) proposes that Joseph repeated with his brothers the exact scene that had happened to him at the mouth of the pit 22 years earlier. We can't be certain, but it is plausible that when he went to his brothers to check on their welfare, they may have accused him of coming to spy on their corrupt behavior. Now he accuses them of being spies. No doubt he had protested that he wasn't spying, just as they now protest. They would have answered him roughly and without any basis for their accusation, just as Joseph now answers them. They threw him in a pit, just as Joseph now throws them in the dungeon.

The parallel between their treatment of Joseph and the treatment they were now receiving was a powerful stimulant to their sleeping consciences. Shortly after they are released from the prison, with no mention of their past behavior, with 22 years of silence and cover up of their sin, they say to one another, "Truly, we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us" (42:21). Being on the receiving end caused this Rip Van Winkle to wake up screaming.

We treat someone wrongly and over the years we manage to put it out of our conscious thoughts. Then someone else treats us just as we wrongly treated that person years ago, and our guilty conscience is aroused. It's the old law of sowing and reaping, with the added factor that when we reap, it causes us to recall those seeds that we forgot we had sown.

3. God uses time for thinking about our pasts to awaken our consciences.

Joseph's brothers probably hadn't given much thought to what it felt like to be a captive in a pit until Joseph put them in the dungeon. He may have put them there both to give them time to think as well as to buy some thinking time for himself. As Joseph thought through his original plan, of keeping all but one in confinement, he realized that it might be more than his aged father could bear. So he changed his plan and decided to keep only one in confinement.

But the effect of three days in the dungeon got his brothers' attention. They began to think about their lives from a spiritual perspective. They thought about their own sin and the fact that sin has consequences. Before this they had shrugged off their sin as if there were no future reckoning with God. But now, sitting in prison for three days, they made the connection.

Thorough repentance often takes time. It's not always quick, easy, and over with. A popular Bible teacher when I was in college used to teach that confession of sin doesn't require any feelings of remorse. In fact, he discouraged any feelings. Rather, he said that we simply had to name our sins, claiming 1 John 1:9. I always felt that he was too flippant toward sin. If sin grieves the Holy Spirit, it ought to grieve me. While God's forgiveness is always based on His grace, not on my working up feelings of remorse, thorough repentance often takes enough time for me to think about what I did to the point that I grieve over my sin.

At this point, Joseph's brothers' consciences were just stirring from a long sleep. They were still a bit groggy, as I am early in the morning. They had a gnawing sense of guilt, but it hadn't yet focused on God. In fact, Joseph is the first to mention God when he brings them out of the prison and gives them a glimmer of hope by saying, "Do this and live, for I fear God" (42:18). The brothers don't mention God until verse 28, when they discover that one man's money has been put back in his sack. It's a significant reference, because in all the previous chapters dealing with the history of Jacob and his sons, these men have never mentioned God until now. It was Joseph's kindness in returning the money which caused them to be afraid and to exclaim, "What is this that God has done to us?" It shows us that ...

4. God uses grace to temper the whole process and bring us to repentance.

Romans 2:4 says that the kindness of God leads us to repentance. Through Joseph's kindness, for the first time in their lives these crusty, worldly brothers saw the hand of God. But note that their first response to this act of grace was not joy, but fear. Verse 28 says that "their hearts sank" and they trembled. This same word is used of Isaac's trembling when he discovered that he had been deceived in the matter of Esau's birthright (27:33). It means to tremble with terror. When the men discover that each one has had his money returned (42:35), they were frightened (NASB = "dismayed"). In John Newton's words, "'Twas grace that caused my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved."

Some think that Joseph was being vindictive in his harsh treatment of his brothers. I don't agree. He knew that they were hard men, and he had to find out where they were at with God and what their attitude was toward their father and Benjamin. Robert Candlish (*Commentary on Genesis* [Zondervan reprint], 2:182) argues that if Joseph had been left to himself,

he would have revealed himself to his brothers immediately. But when they did not recognize him and he remembered his dreams from years before (42:9), he perceived that this was no coincidence. God was in this and God restrained him so that He could use Joseph to bring these men to repentance. We see Joseph's heart when he has to turn away from his brothers and weep (42:24).

Joseph's actions toward his brothers parallel how God brings us to repentance. Notice four ways in which grace shines through:

- A. God's grace shines through when we are not treated as harshly as we deserve.

While Joseph's treatment of his brothers paralleled their earlier treatment of him, it was not nearly as harsh. They intended to kill him and did sell him into slavery, resulting in years of hardship. Joseph only put them in prison for three days. While at first he threatened to keep nine of them in jail and send one back, he softened that to keeping one in jail and sending the nine home, so that they could carry enough food for their households (42:19). While the brothers had been ruthless in ignoring Joseph's cries for help (42:21), Joseph was kind to help them as he did. I think his motive was to see them broken before God, which he knew from experience to be the only place of blessing.

If you know the extent of your sin and have any inkling of the holiness of God, you'll exclaim with David, "Bless the Lord, O my soul! ... He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:1, 10). Even when God's discipline seems harsh, it is never anywhere close to what we deserve.

- B. God's grace shines through when He makes us become

what we profess to be.

The brothers tell Joseph that they are honest men (42:11). That's a bit ironic, because honesty hasn't been one of their noticeable virtues to this point. They deceived the Shechemites. They deceived their father with Joseph's bloodstained coat. Judah led Tamar to believe that she would get his third son in marriage when he had no such intention. And even here, in their next breath they tell Joseph that their one brother "is no more," when they don't know that for sure. They do know that they last saw him heading for Egypt very much alive. Yet they claim to be honest men! So Joseph puts them to the test, to see whether they are indeed honest men (42:16, 19). If they're honest, they can return with the other brother they have talked about.

Sometimes we claim to be Christians when we know well and good that our lives are anything but Christian. But do you know what? Though God could justly abandon us, He graciously holds us to our words. He says, "You say that you're a Christian, do you? Well, let's put that claim to the test. Let's make you into what you claim to be."

- C. God's grace shines through in His compassion which underlies His discipline.

Joseph gives his brothers a glimmer of hope when he tells them, "I fear God." They would not have expected this from this seemingly harsh Egyptian prime minister. But there was enough hope of fair treatment in those words to keep them from despairing and to reveal some tenderness underneath the harsh exterior of this man. If he hadn't been harsh, he wouldn't have gotten their attention. If he hadn't shown them a glimmer of grace, he would have crushed their spirits.

Note the contrast in verse 24. Joseph's compassion is seen in that when he overhears his brothers' conversation about their past sin, he is so overcome with emotion that he leaves the room to weep. But when he returns, he binds Simeon in front of them. They saw the binding, but not the tears. They must have thought this man to be very harsh, when in fact he was acting out of the deepest feelings of love.

There's a good chance that it was Simeon who had been the ringleader in throwing Joseph into the pit where his intention was to kill him. He had been the leader in the slaughter of the Shechemites. In Jacob's final words to his sons, he refers only to Simeon's violence and anger (49:5-7). By putting Simeon in prison, Joseph would prevent his wrongly influencing the others on the return journey and would also hope that the time in prison would break his hardened heart. George Bush observes that Joseph "bound [Simeon] in prison, but he did it to set him free from the far worse chains of his own fierce passions" (*Notes on Genesis* [Klock & Klock], 2:305).

In all this, Joseph reflects God's tender but firm discipline toward us. Just as Joseph didn't reveal himself to his brothers until he saw their repentance, so the Lord won't reveal Himself to us in the trials resulting from our sins until we demonstrate a broken heart. Just as the brothers didn't know that Joseph understood their discussion, since there was an interpreter between them, so many unrepentant sinners don't understand that God knows the very thoughts and intentions of their hearts. Knowing this, His motive in discipline is never cruel. It is always designed for our good. F. B. Meyer writes,

It is thus continually in life's discipline. We suffer, and suffer keenly. Imprisoned, bereaved, rebuked, we count God harsh and hard. We little realize how much pain He is suffering as He causes us pain; or

how the tender heart of our Brother is filled with grief, welling up within Him as He makes Himself strange, and deals so roughly with us" (p. 76).

God knows just how much each of us needs to be broken before Him, and He lovingly takes whatever means are necessary to do it. Until we are broken, He seems very harsh. But if we only knew, like Joseph's heart toward his brothers, God's heart toward us is always filled with compassion. He disciplines us as a loving father disciplines his children, that we might share His holiness.

- D. God's grace shines through when He blesses us when we know we deserve punishment.

Joseph's brothers didn't deserve any kindness, but Joseph secretly put each man's money back in his sack and gave them extra provisions for their return journey (42:25). I think his motive was simply love. I doubt that he knew that it would scare them as it did. They panicked because they figured that when they returned for more grain they would be accused of stealing this money on the first trip.

People who have not yet come to repentance before God don't understand grace. They fear God's judgment for the things they know they've done and not confessed. Knowing they deserve judgment, they have trouble accepting God's undeserved favor.

And yet, as I've said, it was when they first experienced grace by discovering the returned money that they first recognized the hand of God in their lives. Grace had now taught them to fear; it later would relieve those fears and teach them the joy of knowing that their sins were forgiven.

CONCLUSION

If God's hand seems harsh and heavy against you right now, you need to know that His purpose is to rescue you from sin and the character traits which ultimately would destroy you and damage many others. When you yield to Him and draw near in repentance, you will discover His great compassion and grace.

Mark Twain's character Huck Finn observed, "A man's conscience takes up more room than all the rest of his insides." If your conscience feels like that--if it is saying, "Ow!"--don't turn away from God in denial of your sin. Turn to Him in genuine repentance and you will experience the sweet taste of His abundant grace.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can a Christian develop and maintain a good conscience? Can one's conscience be too sensitive?
2. If we have confessed our sin but still have a troubled conscience, does it mean that Satan is accusing us or could there be the need for deeper repentance?
3. Discuss: Can repentance without any feeling of remorse be genuine?
4. Is there a difference between God's discipline and punishment? Does He punish Christians?

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