

A Famine of the Heart

Genesis 42:1-38

He is both lovable and adorable with his top hat, tailed coat, umbrella and spats. He is the voice of reason, the guardian of moral decisions and the guide along the path of life. Some of you may have already guessed that I am referring to Disney's little character Jiminy Cricket. He is the one assigned by the blue fairy to accompany the ever so naïve puppet Pinocchio on his quest to become a real boy. Our beloved little friend provides insightful wisdom to Pinocchio as he navigates the maze of trouble that lurks around every corner. He not only serves as a quaint little friend who is kind, caring and brave, but also is a conscience offering sage advice about the pitfalls of deviant behavior so that he can become a boy with no strings attached.

The naïve nature of Pinocchio coupled with the deceptively clever miscreants gives Jiminy Cricket a run for his money as he is ever chasing after and challenging his ward to reconsider the tangled webs he walks into, a path that will not bring him to his desired goal. Pinocchio's little conscience is with him through thick and thin. Where at first he was unwilling to listen to his conscience, Pinocchio, with the help of this true friend in the end has his dream come true.

We don't have a little lovable animated creature providing a moral compass along our road of life, but each of us does have a conscience given to us by our Creator that can guide us if we will but listen earnestly and intently and follow its voice of reason. Our passage today in **Genesis 42** gives us a glimpse at what God uses to awaken a conscience that has been calloused or seared so that reconciliation can occur in relationships once severed by an unwillingness to listen to this voice of moral judgment. Do you have a famine of the heart?

The conscience has been defined as "that part of the human psyche that induces mental anguish and feelings of guilt when we violate it and feelings of pleasure and well-being when our actions, thoughts and words are in conformity to our value system. The Greek word used in all the occurrences in the

New Testament means moral awareness so that the conscience reacts when one's actions, thoughts, and words conform to, or are contrary to, a standard of right and wrong."

According to **Romans 1:20-22**, that moral standard, in the person of God, has been revealed to everyone since the creation of the world so that we are all without excuse.

There is no equivalent word in the Old Testament for the conscience. They have a different understand of that concept. Where the New Testament speaks of the conscience as being individual and drives each person to decisions about right and wrong, in the Hebrew mind there is a collective nature to the idea of conscience as being national. We'll see that in our passage as the 10 brothers discuss that selling Joseph into slavery was a collective decision. The Jews considered themselves as a member of a covenant community that related corporately not individually to God and His laws. Right or wrong choices done by an individual brought resulting consequences to the nation as a whole. For example, the sin of Achan taking the forbidden spoils of war, affected the entire nation. Or when David sinned by counting the people it affected the whole nation.

Charles Stanley describes the conscience as a universal gift of God that helps us distinguish between what is morally right and wrong. He adds that it continues to urge us to do what is right and restrains us from doing what we recognize to be wrong. He says "our conscience passes judgment on our acts and examines that judgment with our souls."

What he is saying essentially is that our conscience not only tells us the difference between right and wrong, it also urges us to choose what is right instead of what is wrong. And concludes that our conscience judges that decision either by giving us a sense of peace for choosing right or giving us a lack of peace coupled with a sense of guilt for having chosen what is wrong.

Our conscience knows when we have made a right or wrong choice. It knows because God's moral

code has been written on our heart. However, the more times we make a wrong choice, the more those choices reduce the guilt feeling we have until our conscience is seared to the point where it no longer judges our wrong actions that produces a sense of moral guilt that leads to repentance. When a culture says something is right by allowing society to do it, something that God's moral code says is wrong, our conscience can be seared so that it no longer judges those actions.

My hope is that from this passage we will also see the things God can use in our lives to help restore our conscience to be the moral guide it was intended to be. Let's be clear, though, that the conscience is not the Holy Spirit and neither is the Holy Spirit our conscience. The conscience becomes the conduit through which the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to help us in making right choices that direct our steps toward godliness.

So what do we see in this chapter that God uses which can help keep our conscience clear?

In **verses 1-7** we see that God can use barrenness.

I. GOD USES BARRENNESS – vs. 1-7

If you have read anything written by Edgar Allan Poe, you are familiar with his short story [The Telltale Heart](#). It's a story about a man who committed a murder and hid the body beneath the floorboards of his home. In time the police came knocking to ask questions about the whereabouts of the missing man. During the search and subsequent questioning, the man began to hear a faint but growing thumping sound. It was the rhythmic sound of a beating heart that grew louder and louder. The man assumed it was the beating heart of his victim, a sound he tried to stifle, a sound he hoped the police would not hear. But in the mind of the murderer, the sound grew to the point where he thought for sure they must hear it and it drove the man to confess the murder. It is at this point that the reader realizes it wasn't the sound of the victim at all but the sound of the murderer's own pounding heart convicting him through an awakened guilty conscience that produced the confession.

For over 20 years Joseph's brothers have lived with the guilt of mistreating and selling him into slavery. Forever etched in their minds is the vanishing image of their brother being chained and taken away to Egypt as he pled with them not to do this heinous act. I imagine them waking up from time to time in a feverish sweat hearing the echoing cries of Joseph as he's dragged away. They see the terror on his face. They have not only lived with this memory, but also the lie they fabricated to pacify their father.

Genesis 41 ended by emphasizing the severity of the famine that had engulfed not only Egypt, but the whole world. In **chapter 42** the scene has shifted from Egypt back to Canaan and specifically to a little place in Canaan called Hebron and to the family that has become the focus of God's redemptive plan, the family of Jacob. This chapter is about how God uses this famine in a redemptive way to awaken the consciences of 10 men and to set in motion His sovereign plan to bring a fledgling nation down to Egypt that they might be saved and so grow to become His chosen nation.

The patriarch, Jacob, has learned that there is plenty of grain down in Egypt and he has a simple task for 10 of his sons. Stop standing around looking at each other. Go to Egypt and get some food. It was a simple task with an important purpose - so they wouldn't die. Keep in mind that by this time the family has grown. And not only has his family grown, but so has his fortune. He has become quite wealthy. What they needed wasn't just for them, it was also for his flocks and herds. Water sources were drying up and that meant their food plots for them and their animals also became scarce during this famine. This was a task not just for a couple of the sons but would require 10 of them to go to carry back all they needed.

We also learn from the passage that Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin, was to remain behind because Jacob was afraid something foul might happen to him. With the uncertain demise of Joseph, Benjamin had become the favored son of Jacob. Maybe Jacob didn't completely believe the story he had been given by his other sons about

what had happened to Joseph, so he wanted to protect Benjamin from any possible risk. He kept him home so that no harm would come to him.

Verse 5 tells us that they weren't the only foreigners who made the trek to get food from Egypt. If you wanted food, Egypt was the place, so now the scene cuts back to Egypt and when it came to out of towners going for food there was only one person to see – the governor of the land – Zaphenath-Paneah, or as we know him, Joseph. It's my belief that not everyone who wanted grain came to see Joseph. Take 3 or 4 million Egyptians and compound that with people from the surrounding nations and he would have had one busy schedule. I think there were local regents who oversaw the distribution of food to the nationals. But any foreigner who came had to be screened by Joseph and so that's how his 10 brothers came to see him.

When it came time for his 10 brothers to present themselves and make their request, out of respect they bowed before him. After all, he was not only the ruler, he was also the one who said yeah or nay to getting any grain. He held life and death in his hands. He recognized them but they didn't have a clue it was to Joseph they were bowing.

I have often wondered why Joseph in the capacity of his newfound freedom and elevated position as ruler didn't take a little vacation trip to Canaan to visit dear old dad. We are left to wonder.

Was he really that busy that he couldn't get away for a little side trip, take the family to Canaan and introduce them to his kin?

Had he put them out of his mind, especially his jealous brothers and didn't ever want to see them again? Sort of the old out of sight out of mind.

Or was his heart steeped in bitterness and couldn't bear the thought of laying eyes on them again – good riddance to bad rubbish?

Humanly speaking, from our perspective we could argue that any negative attitude was deserved. We could argue, humanly speaking, that he had every right to hold a grudge or as we see in our passage to treat them harshly. We expect that. But let's remember that it's Joseph we're talking about, the

man we said last week who was cut out of a different bolt of cloth, the man who exhibited character traits what were godly in nature, the man I believe who knew that God was with him.

Because of barrenness in the land, they were driven to seek out help. They didn't know it yet, but they had a date with destiny, an unexpected meeting that would begin to melt away the years of barrenness caused by a guilty, seared conscience. They didn't know it was Joseph they stood before but it was Joseph who was used by God to cause them to confront the guilt of their past sins.

Someone has said that the conscience is a lot like a sundial. It's only good when exposed to the light. It is of no use at night. The conscience is only good when it is exposed to the light of God's Word revealed by the Holy Spirit who authored it. Take the light away and the conscience is left in the dark and of no value in guiding us on the right path. That's what we see in **Romans 1** as those who knew God rejected Him. Their thoughts became futile and their hearts darkened. For a long time the soul of Joseph's 10 brothers had been in the dark ignoring the warning signs of a guilty conscience.

I suspect up to this point that the only thing they had done was suppress the truth, stuff it so far down in their subconsciousness that it never came up.

They never talked about it.

They never admitted it.

They never confessed or repented of it.

Not to anyone else.

Not to their father.

And certainly not to God.

F.B. Meyer offers some insight, “the sons had become middle-aged men, with families of their own. They probably never mentioned that deed of violence to each other. They did their best to banish the thought from their minds. Sometimes in their dream they may have caught a glimpse of that young face in its agony, or heard the beseechings of his anguished soul; but they sought to drown such painful memories by deep draughts of the Lethe-stream of forgetfulness. Conscience slept.” The Lethe-stream he refers to is a river in Hades whose

waters cause drinkers to forget their past.

Their lives were barren and would remain so as long as the truth of what really happen lay buried deep within them. But the barrenness of the famine would result in a tangible need for food that would reveal the barrenness of their soul.

Our own barrenness of heart can be the means that God uses to soften the heart and awaken the conscience that we might move to reconciliation and repentance. God makes us needy. He makes us barren and empty. It doesn't matter what we try to do to satisfy the emptiness and God comes along and knocks out the very things we were leaning on. God awakens the barren soul by creating a need.

Psalm 106:15 is a troubling verse. The psalmist takes his readers back to an earlier day in the history of the nation. They had escaped their slavery in Egypt after 400 years, delivered by the miraculous hand of God. But because of sin they wandered the wilderness complaining that they didn't have the things they enjoyed back in Egypt even though they were cast in slavery. **Verse 14** says they put God to the test in the wasteland. And this is what happened. **“So He gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them.”** (The KJV says He sent leanness to their soul.)

God will send barrenness to our soul to bring us to a point of need where we run to Him.

That verse reminds me of the prodigal son. You can read about it in **Luke 15**. He wanted his inheritance before Dad was gone and we read that he went out and squandered it all living up high on the hog. He did whatever he wanted and his conscience became seared. When his money ran out a famine hit. The only work he found was a pig farm doing what was loathsome for a Jew. One day he came to his senses. That means his conscience woke up. Driven by need he remembered Dad and the plenty his hired hands enjoyed and so he headed home and repented.

Has God sent a famine in your life to waken your conscience using your need to draw you back to Him? He may be knocking on the door of your heart

urging you to confess and restore your soul.

God uses barrenness.

God also use brokenness.

II. GOD USES BROKENNESS – vs. 8-24

The 10 brothers are now questioned by the governor. You might ask why Joseph acted harshly toward them and why he called them spies. Although it's not given in the text, we can learn from history that when events, such as a famine afflicted the land, neighboring kings would send spies into the adjacent land to see if there were any potential weaknesses in order to plan an attack. That's why Joseph pressed them so much about being spies.

It's also a good time to again ask why he didn't seize the opportunity to reveal himself to his brothers. I think this is a test to see what was in their heart. In the 20+ years since their last meeting had they changed at all or were they still the same hard-hearted, rebellious brothers who sold him into slavery?

I think he also pressed them to see about the welfare of his father and Benjamin, to see if they were still alive.

Maybe he assumed that if he revealed his identity right away, they might not tell him the truth. For all he knew, they were still the conniving, hating brothers he knew them to be when they sold him. And while they gave him the information he wanted, they seemed to gloss over what happened to him saying that he was no more. As far as they were concerned, he had been, as Chuck Swindoll writes, **“buried in the graveyard of their memories.”**

Joseph continued to press them and initially insisted that the proof of their innocence was to have one brother return to their home and bring this brother back from Canaan. Initially he put them all in prison. I don't think this was an act of revenge for how they had treated him but rather to get them to finally come to grips with their actions 20 years earlier. He is not seeking revenge, he is hoping for reconciliation with his brothers and repentance by

his brothers. Time in prison has sobered up many a person whose heart has grown cold and calloused.

Joseph put them in a place where they could face the reality of their sin, a place where all they had time to do was think about the past, to dwell on the **“brother who was no more”**, the brother they unknowingly stood before. It was used by God to bring them to a place of brokenness in their heart, brokenness that would help it soften. Unbeknown to them, Joseph was confronting them with their sin in order to lead them to repentance. Sometimes there is no better place to do that than in brokenness. God uses brokenness to help in our restoration. He uses brokenness to bring us back to Himself. We see the brokenness of David when he is confronted by Nathan and we are encouraged by **Psalm 32** and **51**.

Peter also comes to mind. For whatever he thought he could gain by denying that he knew Christ on the night of his trial, it really served to reveal his heart. He wasn't the man of strong faith he thought he was, one who was willing to die for his Master, at least not that night. We read that he went out and wept bitterly. He was now broken but some time after the resurrection Christ took Peter in his brokenness and restored him (**John 21**). After his restoration Peter's boldness for Christ is rivalled by few and in time he would die for Christ, unashamed of his Master no more.

We begin to see the brokenness of the 10 brothers after they are released from prison as we talk among themselves in the hearing of Joseph. The **“we”** here is emphatic and is an admission of guilt. Joseph sees the softening of their heart when they admit that they had sinned against him. They admit that they were reaping what they had sown.

Joseph's own heart was moved to the point of excusing himself so that he could weep, weep for his brothers. He is seeing the evidence of changed hearts. God was using Joseph to show them as one author wrote **“the only way for real restoration of their broken relationship to happen, to move sin-hardened men to a place where they can begin again on a new, clean footing is to break down all their defenses and show them who they really are.”**

Has God brought you to a place of brokenness that reveals a heart calloused toward Him? Will you begin to see yourself for how He sees you? As He reveals your real heart, will you let it be softened in order to bring you to repentance and reconciliation?

Consider the words of **Psalm 119:67**. **“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey Your word.”** God uses brokenness from affliction in the steps of softening us for repentance and restoration.

Before we move on to the last point of the passage, I want to make it clear that not all affliction points to some past sin that God wants us to confess. Job is a good example. God described him as blameless and upright, a man who feared God. The prevailing thought of the day as testified by Job's so-called friends was that bad things happen to bad people. That's not always the case. The disciples questioned Jesus about a blind man wondering who had sinned that he should be born without sight. Jesus said no one had sinned. He was born blind in order to reveal the glory of God.

That said, though, God will use affliction to bring us to a point of brokenness where the memory of our past sin is stirred so that we admit and repent.

John Calvin writes “God, in order to lead the sons of Jacob to repentance, impelled them, as well by the secret instinct of His Spirit as by outward chastisement, to become sensible of that sin which had been too long concealed.”

God used their imprisonment to get them to face the facts of the sin they had hidden.

God uses barrenness.

God uses brokenness.

God uses bereavement.

III. GOD USES BEREAVEMENT – vs. 25-38

Twenty some years earlier they watched their brother Joseph cuffed and hauled off. I think they were laughing it up, slapping each other on the back, counting out their money, mocking him about his dreams coming true. But their mood is markedly different now as they watched Simeon cuffed and taken to prison. How their hearts must have been

heavy for so many reasons. They loaded their grain and began the long trek back to Canaan. Only after stopping for the night did one of them realize that all his money had been returned. They are panic stricken. They could be accused of thievery and imprisoned, even worse, be put to death.

I love the imagery of the text here. It says their hearts sank and they trembled. We know what that's like. We don't have a lot of background information on the 10 brothers, but I want you to notice that this is their first mention of God. **“What has He done to us?”** They recognize that God's hand is in this. The fear they felt over finding money in the sack of grain demonstrates an understanding of their guilt. Twenty years earlier they had returned home with money and no Joseph. Now they have returned home with money and no Simeon. But their attitudes and actions reveal to us the proof of hearts that are changing. When they finally arrived home, they told Jacob what happened but left out a few details. I think it's because they truly loved their father and didn't want to grieve him more than he already was from the loss of Joseph. So, when explaining to Jacob about Simeon they didn't tell him he was imprisoned, just that he was left in the land of the Nile, which suggests he was a guest of the steward. They didn't tell Jacob that if they returned without Benjamin they would all be put to death, which would have given greater reason not to send Benjamin when they returned.

And we also see a changed heart, feeble as it may be, when Reuben offers his two sons be put to death if he didn't return with Benjamin. That's of little comfort. Who would want to put their grandchildren to death? It may have been a more noble gesture if he offered himself.

God used the emotion of bereavement to bring about a change in their heart, to soften their conscience about their previous sin. He used their own bereavement over finding the money in their sacks and he used the bereavement of their father at the thought of possibly losing a third son.

Is God using bereavement in your heart to soften it and bring you back to Himself? Bereavement is a

tool God uses to soften the conscience.

There are three truths in the New Testament about the conscience that can help us today.

First, the conscience is the God-given ability given to us for the purpose of self-evaluation.

Acts 24:16

That's only possible if we do a regular self-assessment of our relationships with others and God asking ourselves if we have offended someone by either saying, doing or thinking something that goes against God's standard of right and wrong for which we need to confess. If the answer is yes, admit it and then confess it.

Second, we see in the New Testament that the conscience serves as a witness of something. Paul says that even though the Gentiles don't have the law of God, they have a conscience that is a witness of God's law written on their heart.

Romans 2:14-15

Third, the conscience is a servant of our value system. An immature value system produces an immature conscience while a strong value system produces a strong conscience. As a Christian, our conscience is driven in large part by our understanding of Scripture. The greater our understanding of the Bible, the stronger our conscience is to guide decisions that are right and principled by Scripture. As one author so aptly put it, **“Maturing in the faith strengthens the conscience.”** The less we delve into Scripture, the less time we spend in self-evaluation the greater the risk of becoming insensitive to the leading of our conscience or what **I Timothy 4:1-2** calls having a seared conscience, a conscience that limits the work of God to affect maturity in our lives as believers. It can result in a lack of feeling anything toward the Word and work of God in our heart. That's why God will sometimes used barrenness, brokenness, and bereavement to soften our conscience leading to repentance. That's why **Psalms 139:23-24** is so important.

So, do you have a famine of the heart?