

Joseph's Brothers Come to Egypt During the Famine

Genesis 42:1-21

Genesis 42:1-21 - *"When Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, Jacob said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?"* ² *And he said, "Indeed I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down to that place and buy for us there, that we may live and not die."*

³ *So Joseph's ten brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt.* ⁴ *But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "Lest some calamity befall him."* ⁵ *And the sons of Israel went to buy grain among those who journeyed, for the famine was in the land of Canaan.*

⁶ *Now Joseph was governor over the land; and it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the earth.* ⁷ *Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them. Then he said to them, "Where do you come from?"* *And they said, "From the land of Canaan to buy food."*

⁸ *So Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.* ⁹ *Then Joseph remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them, and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see the nakedness of the land!"*

¹⁰ *And they said to him, "No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food.* ¹¹ *We are all one man's sons; we are honest men; your servants are not spies."*

¹² *But he said to them, "No, but you have come to see the nakedness of the land."*

¹³ *And they said, "Your servants are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and in fact, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more."*

¹⁴ *But Joseph said to them, "It is as I spoke to you, saying, 'You are spies!' ¹⁵ In this manner you shall be tested: By the life of Pharaoh, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. ¹⁶ Send one of you, and let him bring your brother; and you shall be kept in prison, that your words may be tested to see whether there is any truth in you; or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies!" ¹⁷ So he put them all together in prison three days.*

¹⁸ *Then Joseph said to them the third day, "Do this and live, for I fear God: ¹⁹ If you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined to your prison house; but you, go and carry grain for the famine of your houses. ²⁰ And bring your youngest brother to me; so your words will be verified, and you shall not die."*

And they did so. 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."

Background Notes

At the end of Genesis 41 the seven years of famine had begun, just as predicted by Joseph. The famine was in all lands, not just Egypt.

By this time more than 20 years had gone by since Joseph last saw his family. He was betrayed by his brothers and sold as a slave when he was 17 years old (Genesis 37:2), and he was 30 years old when he stood before Pharaoh (Genesis 41:46), so that's 13 years. Add to that the 7 years of plenty, and we have a total of 20 years since his brothers had seen Joseph. And at least a couple of years into the famine had gone by before Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain. When the brothers arrived in Egypt Joseph recognized them, but they didn't recognize Joseph. *"Now Joseph was governor over the land; and it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the earth"* (v6). The brothers bowed to the ground before Joseph - his dreams were finally coming true!

Joseph didn't reveal himself to his brothers. He treated them rather roughly and accused them of being spies. At first glance it might seem that Joseph was being vindictive, but the real reason for this rough treatment was that Joseph was testing his brothers. Was their attitude the same as it had been? Had there been a change in their moral character? How had they treated their father Jacob? How had they treated their brother Benjamin during those 20 years?

It's clear that Joseph was not taking revenge because he wept over his brothers (v24). Notice that when the brothers came and bowed down to him, Joseph didn't say, "Surprise! Here I am! I'm Joseph!" And he didn't say, "You'd **better** bow low! Do you remember those dreams?" No, Joseph didn't say anything like that. Joseph restrained himself, and he began to test his brothers' moral character. And of course, God was using all of these events to remind them of what they had done to Joseph and to awaken the brothers' guilty consciences.

Doctrinal Points

1. God awakens the guilty conscience by arranging circumstances.

It wasn't by chance that the famine spread to the land of Canaan. It wasn't by chance that Joseph's brothers and their families were in need. And it wasn't by chance that Joseph's brothers were forced to come to Egypt to buy food. All of these circumstances were arranged by God to awaken the consciences of those guilty brothers.

Can you imagine how the very mention of Egypt would have triggered painful memories in their minds? Maybe that's why their father asked, *"Why do you look at one another?"* (v1). Their guilty consciences were awakened by the very mention of Egypt! When everything was going well, and when there was abundance during the seven years of plenty, they were able to conveniently forget about Joseph. Their guilty consciences were asleep. But now, with the famine and the need to go to Egypt, their guilty consciences were awakened.

I wonder what they thought about as they traveled to Egypt. Did they think, “Joseph came this way before us, bound as a slave, because we betrayed him.” Did they wonder, “Will we see Joseph working as a slave? Is it possible that he is still alive? Will he see us?” Their guilty consciences were awakened by their circumstances, and God had arranged these circumstances. God awakens the guilty conscience by arranging circumstances.

Are you guilty of unconfessed sin? I can assure you that God will arrange your circumstances so that you will not be able to put your guilty conscience aside forever. God *will* awaken your guilty conscience!

I know of a marriage that was saved because the husband, who was a Christian pastor, was called on to counsel with another couple who were having marital problems – and the problems in the other marriage were identical to his own problems! His guilty conscience was awakened, his own marriage was saved – and so was the other marriage! Praise the Lord! God had arranged circumstances so that that pastor would be called upon to counsel in *that particular situation*. God awakens a guilty conscience by arranging circumstances.

2. God awakens the guilty conscience during times of solitude.

Joseph’s rough treatment of his brothers was designed to test them. As part of the test the brothers were put into prison for three days. What did they think about, confined in prison for three days? They were alone. There were no distractions. They were facing the death penalty, because that was the penalty for spying. Verse 21 tells us what they thought about: “*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.”*”

When people have a guilty conscience, they don’t like solitude. Even when they’re alone, they want all kinds of distractions around them - anything to avoid their guilty conscience and keep it closed down - because God awakens a guilty conscience during times of solitude.

Can you imagine what it will be like for the unbeliever in hell - to live in solitary confinement with a guilty conscience - forever? I believe that is what the Lord was referring to in Mark 9, when He said (more than once), “*where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.*” That guilty conscience will gnaw away at them - forever!

Maybe your guilty conscience has been awakened because God has put you in a time or place of solitude. Thank the Lord for that, and confess your sin. God awakens a guilty conscience during times of solitude.

3. God awakens the guilty conscience with acts of kindness.

Although the brothers were being tested, and they were undergoing rough treatment in the process, yet there were acts of kindness along the way. They were released from prison and they were allowed to return home with grain for their families. Only one brother was kept as security.

And look at what Joseph said to them: *“Do this and live, for I fear God”* (v18). In other words, “Men - follow my instructions, and you will not die. You will live, for I fear God - not the gods of Egypt, but the one true God, the same God that you worship.” What an encouragement to the frightened brothers! What an act of kindness!

Then the brothers were given their money back (as we’ll see later in this chapter). Giving their money back certainly involved a test of their honesty, but it was an act of kindness as well. These acts of kindness were all designed by God to help awaken the brothers’ guilty consciences. God awakens a guilty conscience with acts of kindness.

When a man I know was in college, he stole several hundred dollars’ worth of merchandise from a store where he worked. But his employer was such a kind and generous man, always doing acts of kindness for his employees, that this student just couldn’t live with his guilty conscience. He went to his employer, confessed his sin, and made it right - and in the process he became a Christian as well!

That was God at work, awakening a guilty conscience by acts of kindness. Romans 2:4 says: *“Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?”* God awakens a guilty conscience with acts of kindness.

Practical Application

Spend some time alone with God.

Normally when we talk about spending time alone with God, we mean getting alone with God so He can direct us as to our life of service for Him, or so we will be better able to worship Him. But what about a guilty conscience? It’s important to spend some time alone with God so He can awaken a guilty conscience, if it is there is guilty lying dormant in your life!

In Psalm 139:23-24 David said, *“Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”* David was not afraid to spend time alone with God - he wanted his conscience to be awakened and tried before God!

Every summer I speak at a camp for teens where we have a “Time Alone with God.” It’s a twenty-minute period of time when all the campers and counselors go out by themselves, alone, in solitude, to spend time with God. Why? The Christian kids might need some “alone” time to think through their walk with the Lord, and what He wants them to do, and perhaps make a recommitment to Him. And for the non-Christian kids, God can awaken a guilty conscience during time alone. Hopefully they will see their need to come to Christ for salvation. There are so many distractions in the lives of teens today, so we designed this time to “force” all of us - the teens and the staff - to spend some time alone with God.

We all need to do that. We all need to spend more time alone with God!