

Genesis 42:1-16 Listening to the voice of our conscience

Introduction

Do you ever wish your conscience gave you a break? During my time in the Sixth form at school we had some cold winters. A popular way to warm up was the buy a hot pie from a corner shop near the school. Looking back the proprietors must have made a lot of money as a large number of boys lined up every day in the depths of winter to purchase a much anticipated pie. Getting everyone through in time in the mid-morning or lunch break was quite an operation and an inevitable rapid turnover of customers paying for pies and receiving the same raised the potential for mistakes over the money paid or handed back in change. On one occasion I purchased my pie quickly pocketing the change supplied by the shop assistant and quickly headed back to school. It was soon into the afternoon classes, but later in the day for reasons now unknown I decided to check my change. I rarely had more money on me than my bus fare and the pie cost so it was a simple operation to count the money in my possession. To my surprise I found that the assistant had given me 50p extra in change. I didn't have time to go to the shop after school as it was a mad dash to catch my bus, the first of two on my way home. However, on the way home my mind was turning it over –should I go back to the shop and report the overpayment or considering that I hadn't planned to go to the shop again that week make the effort the next day to return it? In the end I went the following lunchtime, but the reception was not what I expected. The assistant at first insisted no mistake had been made as the till totals tallied at the end of the day. Eventually she took the money with some reluctance, but a message was relayed loud and clear –don't do it again, its embarrassing! All of us have had these kinds of minor moments of our conscience prompting us to sort something out with varying results.

Here in the Joseph story it is not a few pennies but the life of a missing brother that had caused all these grown men to live with the guilty consciences that resulted from their callous action in selling little brother Joseph as a slave. It could not be forgotten! It could not be forgiven, because they had never faced up to what they had done. In many ways life in its fullness was put on hold. They could not prosper and receive God's blessing when this unconfessed sin was a blockage in the way. Isaiah 59:1-2 is an important passage in this matter: *Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear.²But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.* David in Psalm 66:18 warns of the dangers of failing to sort out issues with other people or with God. *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened;* The brothers could have sorted out their problem, but they chose not to do so. However, the day came when the issue could not be avoided, but had probably, at least in psychological terms, become an even bigger problem because of their evasion of personal responsibility. The issue of responding to our conscience is very important. Apparently since 1811 the American Federal Government has kept a separate bank account called the Federal Conscience Fund. US citizens, whose conscience has troubled them, have over the years deposited sums of money to cover such things as - unpaid taxes, donations in lieu of property taken from Government buildings and deliberate underpayment on postage stamps. The total sum donated amounts to several million dollars. Almost all of us at times write letter, make phone calls or pay visits to say 'sorry' or to put right things we have said or not said; done or not done. Yet a small number of people are so hardened that they never wish to take such a step, despite engaging like the rest of imperfect humanity in mistakes in thought, word and actions. There can often be something that triggers guilty memories. For these brothers it was a mention of the word 'Egypt'. It was going to come up a lot as the famine gripped Canaan like

other nations in the region. In a context where he had been warning representatives of three Israelite tribes about the importance of keeping their promises, Moses uttered these words in Numbers 32:23: *But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the Lord; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out.* There are always consequences to our actions that happen sooner or later. Too many people forget this fact.

1. The means God uses (Genesis 42:1-5)

(a) The past event that would be uncovered (Genesis 42:1) *When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt; he said to his sons, 'Why do you just keep looking at each other?'* In my High School days there were a fair number of times when people said silly things or did something inappropriate but the teacher was unsure which member of the class was responsible. So we had to sit in silence until someone owned up or another person told on them. On one or two occasions the standoff went on for quite a while. It was that kind of atmosphere in Jacob's extended household whenever the subject of 'food' and 'Egypt' were mentioned. But these individuals were not naughty schoolboys being immature but grown men, many of them with families. It is probable that between twenty and twenty-five years had passed since that awful day at Dothan (Genesis 3:12-36). You can feel the tension behind these words in Genesis 42:1: *When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, 'Why do you just keep looking at each other?'* In 2000 police in Shipley, West Yorkshire went to the door of a house to speak to a man about the murder of a young woman less than a mile away, twenty-five years earlier. It had been a vicious murder with an uncertain motive. At the time police were frustrated with being unable to pin the crime on any particular suspect, but now advances in DNA profiling ensured that the killer, whose DNA they possessed, would be discovered. In the meantime the man in question had settled down, married and had a family. Many years of respectable living had masked the dark secret of his earlier unsavoury years. The Police Officers who went to his door reported that their invitation to accompany them to the police station was met with a kind of relief as the man knew that one day he would get a knock at the door from the Police uncovering his guilty secret. After his conviction the story of the case was shown on television. I felt profoundly sorry for his wife and children whose lives were thrown into turmoil –like another family through no fault of their own. The sons of Jacob knew that their secret shame would be exposed. Did they wonder how their father and their wives would think of them when it happened –rather than if it happened. It is my conviction that Joseph's terrified face as he was dragged away by the traders haunted them as if it had only recently happened. Later they will discuss it in Egypt in the presence of Joseph, though they were not aware he was in the room (Genesis 42:21), but the consciences of these men would not remain silent. There are people then and now who must always be looking over their shoulders for people they have conned or cheated. Some appear on the surface to love the thrill of living life on the edge, but one day their past will catch up with them. In the book of Amos chapter four, the prophet explained how God used a variety of means to challenge people living sinful lives to amend their ways. These methods included famine, drought, pestilence and plague. He declared in Amos 4:6-9: *'I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to Me,' declares the Lord.*⁷ *'I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up.*⁸ *People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to Me,' declares the Lord.*⁹ *'Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, destroying them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to Me,' declares the Lord.* The message here is abundantly clear. The question for us today, as for God's people in each generation, is simply this: what will it take for God to get our attention and for us to respond

to Him speaking through our consciences when we need to make some changes? Later in Amos 8:11-12 the prophet warned of an even more serious problem if the Israelites of his day kept hardening their hearts against God: *'The days are coming,' declares the Sovereign Lord, 'when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.'*¹² People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for *the word of the Lord*, but they will not find it. There is no more serious state a person can be in than when God stops speaking to them and His voice through our consciences cannot be heard. The unknown author of Psalm 119 made this important observation: *Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word* (Psalm 119:67).

(b) **The present journey that had to be made** (Genesis 43:2-5) ² *He continued, 'I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die.'*³ Then ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt. ⁴ *But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with the others, because he was afraid that harm might come to him.* ⁵ *So Israel's sons were among those who went to buy grain, for there was famine in the land of Canaan also.* The famine was serious and years of no harvests still lay ahead of them. They did not know quite how serious the problem was. Yet God had things under His control. All they could see were dwindling supplies of food and no means to replace the declining stocks, but the Lord was at work ensuring that the necessary means for survival were available in the region. One of the tragedies of life on earth in the last hundred years is that there has been plenty of food for everyone to eat, but the will to feed the hungry has too often been lacking amongst those with the economic and political power to do something about it. Will another century pass before clean water, food and sanitation facilities are common for us all? I sincerely hope not. The atmosphere in this family was extremely tense. Old Jacob sensing something was not right declined to allow Benjamin to travel to Egypt with the other brothers. All of us at times have been in rooms full of people where everyone was aware of a topic of conversation significant for all concerned, but no-one wanted to initiate it, not know how things would turn out. This journey to buy wholesale quantities of food was much more than a commercial transaction. Every step of the way these brothers would be thinking of Joseph as he had undertaken that same travel route more than a couple of decades earlier. They too went full of apprehension of what might take place. In neither case was the journey optional, both Joseph earlier due to enslavement and the brothers now due to encroaching famine had to go to Egypt. Yet the place of fear and vulnerability would become the location of their salvation. Then and now God is at work in surprising places and sometimes through unexpected people or circumstances. Yet the resolution was only possible because they started out on the first of a number of long trips to Egypt. In our own life situations there are few quick fixes, but over time God who works in us and for us for our good will be active, ensuring that He gives us the grace to come through the difficult paths He allows us to tread.

2. **The context God chooses** (Genesis 42:6-16)

(a) **The vindication of Joseph** (Genesis 42:6)

⁶ *Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.* In Genesis 37:5-9 it states: *Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more.* ⁶ *He said to them, 'Listen to this dream I had: ⁷ we were binding sheaves of corn out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered round mine and bowed down to it.'* ⁸ *His brothers said to him, 'Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?' And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.* This dream given to a seventeen-year-old so resented by his brothers had come true. The other dream given sometime later, possibly in the same year, would also be fulfilled, but many more years were

to pass before that would be demonstrated. We as human beings long for things to happen quickly but God's timescale is often much longer. Patience is something we struggle with in the Western world much to the horror of people in Eastern cultures who view things so differently. At times we can be tempted to think that God has forgotten our situation. After it is easy to reason that He has much bigger things to attend to and our little concern must be way down the priority list compared to a major war or natural disaster. The latter point can be very true and accurate without the implications for lesser concerns. Our reasoning is based on our finite capacity for action and our limited ability to accomplish things. God who is omnipotent does not have these constraints. The long years that had passed had only recently ceased to be a major issue to Joseph following the birth of his children. He had come to a place of letting go of the hurts of the past, recognising that he might never see his brothers again; that he might never hear them ask for forgiveness, but to be able to reach the place where it no longer defined his future was an important step for him to take. On the day I wrote this message I heard a few minutes worth of a radio phone-in discussing the issue of forgiveness in the context of very serious crimes of abuse and murder and the victims of terrorist attacks. A number of people spoke, including most helpfully a Pastor from Northern Ireland whose son had been murdered, but one person's contribution in particular was painful to hear. He (and others) had been victims of a callous individual who had never acknowledged his crimes; had never been convicted in a court of law despite being arrested on at least a couple of occasions. The failure of the evil person in question either to face justice or to apologise to his victims had led this person to live a very broken life completely defined by what had taken place in his childhood.

It must have been an awful shock for Joseph to see his brothers standing in front of him bowing low in respect to the official in charge of that food distribution centre. There were food distribution centres in each of the major population centres of the country. I do not believe that Joseph remained at one for the whole fourteen years without visiting all the others. It is much more likely that he travelled round each of them in turn to observe how the crisis was being managed. In the providence of God he was present at this particular centre, possibly the nearest one to Canaan? when these brothers showed up. It was not an accident or by chance, rather it was in the will of God that they should meet that day. The emotions that must have rushed through his body at the moment he recognised them. Only a robot could have avoided serious emotional conflict at a time like that. God would bring a resolution to this family heartache for which some of them might have been praying, but then and now the method He chooses to bring it to a conclusion can be very different to what we expected might be the approach He would take. What is important as Christians as we pray for these kind of situations is never to give up hope; never to cease trusting that God is at work behind the scenes, even if we cannot discern how at a particular moment in time. Joseph would be vindicated and his faithfulness to God and his faith convictions would be honoured. However, this journey to healing and wholeness still had a good number of years to run before the emotional wounds would be healed. When we read these biblical stories there is no tension because we know how they end. For Joseph and other biblical characters we admire the outcome was much less certain at many stages along the way.

(b) **The confrontation with Joseph** (Genesis 42:7-9) ⁷As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognised them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he asked. 'From the land of Canaan,' they replied, 'to buy food.'⁸Although Joseph recognised his brothers, they did not recognise him. ⁹Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, 'You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected.' There were several ways Joseph could have responded to his brothers. He could have rushed over while their faces were inches from the dust and dirt and called out: 'I'm Joseph, remember my dream

about sheaves of corn.’ If scaring the living daylights out of his brothers had been his sole objective then this was the obvious route to take. In the heat of the moment it would have been easy to take this route, but who would have gained from it? Momentary satisfaction from making them squirm would have felt sweet at the time but it would not have been a lasting emotion. In theory, Joseph could have decided life was too short to allow this problem to fester any longer and simply told them who he was and forgiven them upfront, before they had engaged in conversation with him. Again, he might have felt good at taking the moral higher ground, but it is unlikely to have changed their non-existent relationship. The brothers would almost certainly have simply paid for their grain and rushed back to Canaan at the earliest opportunity determined not to come back no matter how bad their lives had become. However, lest we forget that the men standing in front of him were hardly paragons of virtue, it is important to remember that in addition to their ill-treatment of Joseph, two of the brothers were sadistically cruel to animals and were multiple murderers; others had experienced dysfunctional relationships and transgressed moral boundaries that ensured they were a hardened bunch of men that would not easily repent of their sin and rebuild their relationship with Joseph. Saying words of regret on the day was one thing, but following them up with a transformed way of living would be quite different. So how did Joseph approach this situation? I suspect he had replayed this encounter in his mind on numerous occasions. I think it likely that he had several scenarios going through his mind as to what to say and do, since he was first enslaved. Yet on a busy working day it is more than likely that his focus was totally on the work in hand and thus was completely surprised to see his brothers standing in front of him.

The approach he took is given in Genesis 42:9: *Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, ‘You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected.’* It has been suspected by some Bible commentators that this was the accusation the brothers had raised against Joseph all those years earlier, claiming that he was spying on them for his father with a view to presenting a bad report about them. We can never prove this one way or another, but this possibility is to my mind highly plausible. Joseph wisely wanted them to learn a lesson from this situation. He wanted to reawaken their consciences so as to enable them to process what had happened before any reconciliation could take place. Memories good or bad are triggered by the use of words or phrases from the past. If this assessment is correct then raising their false allegation against Joseph and turning it back on them to allow them to experience how it felt to be accused in this way was a powerful challenge to their consciences. So often we prefer quick fixes to get things out of the way, but such understandable reasoning is not necessarily the basis for the best resolution of the situation. Here this approach that Joseph chose would take some years to conclude, but it would bring the best possible resolution of this family tragedy. It is sensible to stop at times and remind ourselves that there are no perfect solutions for difficult problems. We can but do our best bringing with us our past experience as a guide for present-day actions.

(c) **The challenge presented by Joseph** (Genesis 42:10-16) ¹⁰ *‘No, my lord,’ they answered. ‘Your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹ We are all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies.’ ¹² ‘No!’ he said to them. ‘You have come to see where our land is unprotected.’ ¹³ But they replied, ‘Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more.’ ¹⁴ Joseph said to them, ‘It is just as I told you: you are spies! ¹⁵ And this is how you will be tested: as surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. ¹⁶ Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies!’ ¹⁷ And he put them all in custody for three days. If the previous assumption is correct, that Joseph’s brothers had accused their little brother of spying on them for their father, it must be acknowledged that*

they genuinely felt a sense of grievance. However, while acknowledging their perception of reality, it was an incorrect understanding of the role played by Joseph in this family. He had been treated more favourably, provoking their resentment, but this was due to the challenging nature of a multi-family household. This former teenager could not be held responsible for the unwise decisions of adults. Yet as so often happens in life people's frustrations are taken out on a third party rather than the one ultimately responsible for a particular problem. At its most basic level when a product or service today falls below our reasonable expectations and we phone the company it is a junior member of staff who takes the call. They have no say over company policy. The person who makes those decisions is rarely available to get involved in communications with the general public. Undoubtedly the brothers felt vulnerable when their claims went unheeded. They certainly felt unfairly treated. It is unclear how they thought giving family information to a complete stranger could help them, but it certainly gave Joseph the opportunity he was seeking to see how they would treat one another when put to the test. Yet it is only in the pressure situations when we see how we practice what we profess. The brothers had entered the first stages of a reconciliation process, albeit unwillingly, but in the end it would be for their good. In I Kings 17:7-24 the story of Elijah and the widow of Zaraphath is recorded. It begins with the extraordinary provision of food in a time of famine that saved their lives, but tragedy strikes as the little boy dies. I Kings 17:17-18 records some interesting words from this woman. *Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing.* ¹⁸ *She said to Elijah, 'What do you have against me, man of God? **Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?**'* Elijah has never mentioned this 'sin'. But some incident in this woman's past has come powerfully to her mind. The story ends on a happy note with the restoration to life of the boy and this woman's acknowledgement of the God of Israel, but this may not have come about without that crisis.

Was there some reverse psychology here in Genesis 42:16-17? The brothers had previously selected Joseph for slavery. He gave them three days in prison rather than a pit to consider an offer of selecting one brother for freedom! It does appear on the surface that Joseph had allowed them to experience how he felt with a false accusation of spying, followed by imprisonment for an unknown duration of time. The challenge for them and for us in our times of testing is this? What can I /we learn from this experience? How can we avoid making mistakes that may have been made in the past? If required how can we bring closure to painful episodes in our past? Through it all to recognise the hand of God at work in our midst, for our good and for His glory, Amen.