

SERIES: Joseph: From Pit to Prominence

SERMON: **Time Alone Doesn't Heal a Guilty Conscience**

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 42-44

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

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Before I speak today on the topic, *Time Alone Doesn't Heal a Guilty Conscience*, I want to say a word about next Sunday's message, *Forgiving the Hard to Forgive*. We're going to focus on Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers who years earlier had sold him into slavery, in effect ending the life he knew as a boy of 17 and forcing him into slavery in a foreign land and eventually to prison. In addition to examining that powerful passage in Genesis 45, we're going to hear a testimony from someone in our church who had to learn how to forgive the hard to forgive. This individual was traumatized by having three members of his family murdered, and then in an amazing travesty the killer was released to walk free. He's going to share with us an extended testimony about how God enabled him to forgive. I don't think you will want to miss it.

Our Scripture text today covers three full chapters of Genesis. Obviously if we read the entire portion there would be time for little else. On the other hand, I cannot tell the story nearly as well as the author has told it. So with your indulgence I am going to read most of it, with selected repetitive portions left out. This is indeed one of the great stories of the Bible, and I think you will profit most if you will follow along (page 32 in the pew Bible). Just be grateful I am not asking you to stand while I read.

*When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you just keep looking at each other?" (Literally in Hebrew: "Why do sit there staring at your navels!") [just kidding]. 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."*

*Then ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with the others, because he was afraid that harm might come to him. So Israel's sons were among those who went to buy grain, for the famine was in the land of Canaan also.*

*Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the one who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized 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."*

*Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected."*

*"No, my lord," they answered. "Your servants have come to buy food. We are all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies."*

*"No!" he said to them. "You have come to see where our land is unprotected."*

*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."*

*Joseph said to them, "It is just as I told you: You are spies! 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. 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!" And he put them all in custody for three days.*

*On the third day, Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households. But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die." This they proceeded to do.*

*They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us."*

*Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood." They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter.*

*He turned away from them and began to weep, but then turned back and spoke to them again. He had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes.*

*Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to put each man's silver back in his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. After this was done for them, they loaded their grain on their donkeys and left.*

*At the place where they stopped for the night one of them opened his sack to get feed for his donkey, and he saw his silver in the mouth of his sack. "My silver has been returned," he said to his brothers. "Here it is in my sack."*

*Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, "What is this that God has done to us?"*

*When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them.*

The next 5 or 6 verses are a rehearsal by the brothers to Jacob of what had happened to them in Egypt. Let's pick up the story with verse 35:

*As they were emptying their sacks, there in each man's sack was his pouch of silver! When they and their father saw the money pouches, they were frightened. Their father Jacob said to them, "You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me!"*

*Then Reuben said to his father, "You may put both of my sons to death if I do not bring him back to you. Entrust him to my care, and I will bring him back."*

*But Jacob said, "My son will not go down there with you; his brother is dead and he is the only one left. If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in sorrow."*

## Chapter 43:

*Now the famine was still severe in the land. So when they had eaten all the grain they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go back and buy us a little more food."*

*But Judah said to him, "The man warned us solemnly, 'You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you.' If you will send our brother along with us, we will go down and buy food for you. But if you will not send him, we will not go down, because the man said to us, 'You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you.' "*

*Israel asked, "Why did you bring this trouble on me by telling the man you had another brother?"*

*They replied, "The man questioned us closely about ourselves and our family. 'Is your father still living?' he asked us. 'Do you have another brother?' We simply answered his questions. How were we to know he would say, 'Bring your brother down here?'"*

*Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the boy along with me and we will go at once, so that we and you and our children may live and not die. I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him here before you, I will bear the blame before you all my life. As it is, if we had not delayed, we could have gone and returned twice."*

So Jacob finally reneges and gives the brothers instructions to take gifts and double the silver and return to Egypt. We pick up again in verse 15:

*So the men took the gifts and double the amount of silver, and Benjamin also. They hurried down to Egypt and presented themselves to Joseph. When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, "Take these men to my house, slaughter an animal and prepare dinner; they are to eat with me at noon."*

*The man did as Joseph told him and took the men to Joseph's house. Now the men were frightened when they were taken to his house. They thought, "We were brought here because of the silver that was put back into our sacks the first time. He wants to attack us and overpower us and seize us as slaves and take our donkeys."*

*So they went up to Joseph's steward and spoke to him at the entrance to the house.*

They plead innocence in regard to the silver and are told by the steward that it's OK. Verse 26:

*When Joseph came home, they presented to him the gifts they had brought into the house, and they bowed down before him to the ground. He asked them how they were, and then he said, "How is your aged father you told me about? Is he still living?"*

*They replied, "Your servant our father is still alive and well." And they bowed low to pay him honor.*

*As he looked about and saw his brother Benjamin, his own mother's son, he asked, "Is this your youngest brother, the one you told me about?" And he said, "God be gracious to you, my son." Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there.*

*After he had washed his face, he came out and, controlling himself, said, "Serve*

*the food."*

*They served him by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians. The men had been seated before him in the order of their ages, from the firstborn to the youngest; and they looked at each other in astonishment. When portions were served to them from Joseph's table, Benjamin's portion was five times as much as anyone else's. So they feasted and drank freely with him.*

#### Chapter 44

*Now Joseph gave these instructions to the steward of his house: "Fill the men's sacks with as much food as they can carry, and put each man's silver in the mouth of his sack. Then put my cup, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one's sack, along with the silver for his grain." And he did as Joseph said.*

*As morning dawned, the men were sent on their way with their donkeys. They had not gone far from the city when Joseph said to his steward, "Go after those men at once, and when you catch up with them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid good with evil? Isn't this the cup my master drinks from and also uses for divination? This is a wicked thing you have done.'"*

*When he caught up with them, he repeated these words to them. But they said to him, "Why does my lord say such things? Far be it from your servants to do anything like that! We even brought back to you from the land of Canaan the silver we found inside the mouths of our sacks. So why would we steal silver or gold from your master's house? If any of your servants is found to have it, he will die; and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves."*

*"Very well, then," he said, "let it be as you say. Whoever is found to have it will become my slave; the rest of you will be free from blame."*

*Each of them quickly lowered his sack to the ground and opened it. Then the steward proceeded to search, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. At this, they tore their clothes. Then they all loaded their donkeys and returned to the city.*

*Joseph was still in the house when Judah and his brothers came in, and they threw themselves to the ground before him. Joseph said to them, "What is this you have done? Don't you know that a man like me can find things out by divination?"*

*"What can we say to my lord?" Judah replied. "What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup."*

*But Joseph said, "Far be it from me to do such a thing! Only the man who was found to have the cup will become my slave. The rest of you, go back to your father in peace."*

*Then Judah went up to him and said: "Please, my lord, let your servant speak a word to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, though you are equal to Pharaoh himself."*

Judah then gives an impassioned speech to Joseph, pleading with him not to keep the boy

Benjamin or his father will die.

I close the reading with the first three verses of chapter 45:

*Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.*

*Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

I want to begin today with a general observation from the life of Joseph:

**A clear conscience allows us to experience the calm of a holy life and to enjoy the satisfaction of a fruitful life.**

When comparing the path of Joseph with that of his brothers, I would expect to see an enormous difference in their psychological health. After all, Joseph has experienced tremendous trauma in his life, losing his mother at a young age, betrayed by his brothers as a teenager, forced into slavery in a foreign country, imprisoned for something he didn't do. Even his success and prosperity must have produced lots of stress in his life, for he was first the executive of Potiphar's whole estate, then chief steward in a prison, then Prime Minister of Egypt during a great famine—all high-stress jobs.

On other hand, his brothers lived a pastoral life—out in the countryside, watching Jacob's herds graze. I've spent enough time on the farm to know that while farming is not without its headaches, it's a good life that lends itself to good psychological health.

Well, sure enough, there *is* an enormous difference in the mental and emotional health of Joseph and his brothers, but it's just the opposite of what you might expect. Despite all the trials and headaches he inherited, Joseph never gives the impression of being stressed out, or struggling to cope with the cards life has dealt him. I suggest that one of the major reasons is that Joseph has a clear conscience. He knows he has lived a life of integrity. He knows he did not betray Potiphar but was falsely accused. He knows his time in prison was undeserved. He knows God has been with him and is the One who elevated him at the age of 30 to the highest position possible for someone not born into the royal family.

Back in chapter 41, which Dick taught last week, we learned that when Joseph's two sons were born, he named one Manasseh and the other Ephraim. Manasseh means, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and my father's household." Ephraim means, "It is because he has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering." Both of these names demonstrate that Joseph is willing to give all the credit for his positive frame of mind and his position to God.

On the other hand, we find that Joseph's brothers are very unhealthy individuals and that leads

me to a second observation:

**A guilty conscience plagues us in the form of fear and blaming others.**

In chapter 42 the brothers demonstrate that they have never dealt with the guilt of selling their brother. When they first meet Joseph (not realizing that he *is* Joseph) they react to his demand that they bring their youngest brother to Egypt by saying to one another in 42:21, “Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that’s why this distress has come upon us.” They are, of course, speaking Hebrew to one another and don’t have the slightest idea that the Egyptian before them understands every word.

Now do you notice the blame game the brothers resort to? Reuben replies in verse 22, “Didn’t I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn’t listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood.” This kind of thing is so common when guilt is allowed to eat away at a person’s character. What happens psychologically is that the guilty person feels he has so little left to his core being that he simply must protect it, and the only way to do so is to deflect blame on others.

Jacob even joins in the blame game. He says to his sons (43:6), “Why did you tell the man you had another brother?” Such a comment is so useless, yet so normal. The information has already been revealed, so what good does it do for Jacob to attack his sons for it? It just forces them to become defensive: “How were we to know he would say, ‘Bring your brother down here’?” What they had revealed was not done intentionally to harm anyone, but Jacob thinks he needs a scapegoat.

But it’s not only blame that a guilty conscience produces; it’s also fear. From the moment they are called spies by Joseph I suspect the fear wells up in the brothers’ hearts. They surely know the fate of a spy in ancient times. Their fright surfaces again when they discover the money in their grain sacks. And again when they are taken to Joseph’s house. And again when the silver cup is discovered in Benjamin’s sack.

Just try to put yourself in their shoes and you can understand that fear. I personally believe that all of it is related to and intensified by their guilty consciences from the past. Look at the resignation expressed by Judah in verse 16 of chapter 44: “What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants’ guilt. We are now my lord’s slaves.” Judah is declaring their innocence in regard to the cup but acknowledging their greater guilt in regard to their brother.

Of course, all the fear they express throughout the story doesn’t hold a candle to the terror that paralyzes them when Joseph finally reveals who he is. It says in verse 3 of chapter 45 that “his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.” What Joseph said is, “I am Joseph! Is my father still living?” But what they heard is, “I am Joseph and *you* are dead men.” Friends, I want to offer you a principle today that I believe to be categorically true:

## **To find freedom from a guilty conscience, there's no substitute for true repentance.**

**1. Time is no substitute.** Mind you, more than two decades have passed since the brothers did their dastardly deed. Joseph was 17 when sold into slavery. He was 30 when he became Prime Minister in Egypt (41:46). Then for seven years he stores up grain, and now the famine has been going on for two years. I suspect during those 22 years not a negative thing happened that didn't cause one of the brothers to say, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother." One of the terrible results of unresolved guilt is that a person always has to look over his shoulder.

I have quoted before from one of the greatest sermons ever preached— *Payday Someday* by Dr. Robert G. Lee. It is the story of Ahab and Jezebel and how they killed Naboth, stole his vineyard, and were condemned by the prophet Elijah, who predicted that dogs would lick Ahab's blood and dogs would eat Jezebel. In one section of the sermon Lee asks,

*Did payday ever come for Ahab? Yes. Consider how. Three years went by. Ahab was still king. And I dare say that during those three years Jezebel had reminded him that they were eating herbs out of Naboth's vineyard. I can hear her say something like this as they sat at the king's table: "Ahab, help yourself to these herbs. I thought Elijah said the dogs were going to lick your blood. I guess the dogs lost the trail."*

*But I think that during those three years, Ahab never heard a dog bark that he did not jump.*

Likewise Joseph's brothers probably never faced a misfortune which did not cause them to wonder whether God was disciplining them for what they did to Joseph. That, friends, is a tragic way to live, and so unnecessary.

**2. Shared guilt is no substitute.** We are sometimes tempted to think, "But lots of other people have done what I did." So? That still won't help you clear your conscience. You'd think that when ten brothers have all participated in the same crime the shared guilt would make it easier on each of them. But not so! It only causes them to be at each other's throats. How many crimes have been solved by one criminal turning on the others?

**3. Prosperity is no substitute.** Jacob is not a poor man, nor do I suspect his sons are lacking in resources. When it comes time to go to Egypt to find food, money to pay for it is no problem. They could have thought, "If what we did was so bad, why is God blessing us?" But despite the prosperity of the family's herds, the overwhelming issue that keeps coming up is what the brothers did to Joseph and the secret they had kept from their father.

Friends, there is no substitute for true repentance if you desire freedom from a guilty conscience. So, where do you start?

## **True repentance starts with the full awakening of the conscience.**

The brothers are plagued by guilt, but the Lord must fully awaken their consciences, and through

Joseph God uses a number of tests to bring this about.

**1. The test of reminder.** God causes the brothers to return to the scene of the crime. Egypt is the place to which they had sold their brother. When we have sinned before God we often find little reminders coming across our paths: people we have sinned against, Scripture passages which speak of our sin, dates that remind us of our sin. We can either allow these things to stimulate our conscience or we can repress them and continue to wallow in our guilt.

**2. The test of false accusation.** The brothers are falsely accused of being spies and of stealing. The effect of false accusation can awaken us to the fact that we ourselves are guilty of sin, even if not the specific sin of which we are accused. Or it can distract us and focus our attention completely upon the injustice we are currently suffering. I've seen it produce either result.

**3. The test of adversity.** The brothers suffer both famine and prison. These are really megaphones God is employing to arouse their consciences. But again they, as we, have the option of turning a deaf ear to God's megaphone.

**4. The test of fear.** One of the tragedies of a guilty conscience is that you never know for sure if some tragedy is a simple misfortune or a chastisement from God. And that produces unwarranted fear. What an amazing sense of freedom is available when we no longer have to look over our shoulders because we know there is nothing on our slate that can condemn us. Joseph's brothers did not yet enjoy that freedom.

**5. The test of dashed hope.** Sometimes we have a close call with our conscience, then escape and sigh with relief. I wonder if that isn't what happens to Joseph's brothers. Afraid for their lives when summoned to Joseph's house, they then find themselves free and on their way home to Palestine—the whole family intact, grain purchased, and no worse for the wear. Then the roof caves in as Joseph's cup is discovered in Benjamin's sack! Their hope is dashed as God is still testing them.

**6. The test of interpersonal conflict.** We will often discover that when we're living with unconfessed guilt, our relationships with those closest to us go sour. This happens to Joseph's brothers as they become suspicious of each other and struggle with their father.

### **True repentance demonstrates itself in changed behavior.**

If it starts with the awakening of the conscience, it must be completed with a change in heart and attitude. One can claim to have repented, but the only proof of a clean conscience is godly behavior.

**1. Honesty.** These brothers who so freely lied to their father now seem willing to pay the price of truthfulness. They are honest in admitting they had a brother who "is no more." They could have repeated the lie that he was killed by a wild animal, but they don't. They are also honest in paying back the silver that was put in their sacks. And they are honest with

Joseph's steward about all that had transpired.

**2. Admission of guilt (confession).** In 42:21 they admit to each other that they have sinned. In 44:16 they admit it to Joseph.

**3. Concern for the welfare of others.** The brothers who showed no concern for Joseph as a young child, now show enormous concern for Simeon and Benjamin and Jacob. Reuben even offers to put his own two sons to death if he doesn't keep his promise. Judah guarantees that he will bring Benjamin back or pay the consequences for the rest of his life.

**4. Freedom from jealousy.** I note something very subtle but interesting in verse 34 of chapter 43. These brothers who responded so heinously to the favoritism Jacob showed to Joseph in the case of the coat of many colors, do not react negatively at all when their youngest brother Benjamin is given five times as much food as anyone else. Instead "they feasted and drank freely." Could it be that they have finally learned the awful cost of envy? God has been testing the brothers through Joseph, and now they seem to be prepared to be forgiven.

**Conclusion:** Do you have a guilty conscience? I'm not asking whether you yelled at one of your kids in the car on the way to church today, or if you failed to write a thank-you note to someone. I'm asking, "Is there a sin in your life that is eating your lunch? A sin you have hidden from everyone? A sin that forces you to constantly look over your shoulder?" Perhaps you have stolen money, lied on a resume, or cheated a business partner. Maybe you have an illicit sexual relationship going on right now. Perhaps you have a secret addiction that no one knows about, and you have become adept at telling yourself that it doesn't matter. Well, God knows about it and it does matter. The skeletons in your closet will never go away by themselves, and the resultant guilt will never be resolved, until you have come clean.

In the 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalm David conveys clearly the fact that guilt will deal with you if you don't deal with it. In verse 3 he shares his own personal experience as he tried for a long while to hide his sin with Bathsheba: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. . . . My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer," This is the pitiful picture of a person in psychological and emotional, even physical agony as he tries to ignore his sin.

Have you ever been there? I have. I distinctly remember one time when I had gotten into some serious trouble in Junior High. My conscience was doing a terrible number on me. Late that night I went into my parents' room, woke them up, and said, "I can't stand it. I can't sleep. You've got to help me." They were wise enough to encourage me to lay everything out to the Lord and then they prayed with me. I finally went to sleep that night, but I never forgot how terribly painful that feeling was. Hospitals and psychiatric wards are full of people who are sick or even dying, in part because of the effects of unresolved guilt.

But there are not only psychological and physical repercussions from guilt; there are also spiritual ones. David also says, "Your hand was heavy upon me." God has ways of bringing pressure upon us, often acute pressure, until we acknowledge our sin. The fellowship David

once enjoyed with God is gone; that's why he prays in Psalm 51, "Restore to me the joy of my salvation."

Every therapist or counselor—Christian or non-Christian—agrees that living with unresolved guilt is unhealthy. But the world's solution too often is to deny it or suppress it or repress it or transfer it to someone else? No, David tells us, guilt is resolved only through confession and forgiveness. In verse 5 he says, "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord'—and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

Is that cleansing still available today? It is. Jesus Christ died for you and paid the penalty for your sin. His blood will wash away your guilt as you turn to Him in faith and trust Him as your personal Savior.