

# GAINING THROUGH GUILT

## **GENESIS 42:1-28**

It is a popular urban legend that says the IRS received the following letter a number of years ago:

*Dear Sirs,  
Last year I cheated on my income tax statement and, since that time, I have been unable to sleep at night. Enclosed is a check for \$150. If I still cannot sleep, I will send you a check for the rest of the money.*

Guilt. It isn't a very popular subject. We live in an age when psychologists would have us believe that guilt is a bad thing and that we would all be okay if we could only weed out all feelings of guilt.

Concepts of right and wrong are seen as antiquated ideas that can be replaced by the idol of situation ethics. It is claimed that if a man commits a crime, it is really the fault of his environment.

We have redefined sin to make it more socially acceptable. We don't call it adultery, we call it "having an affair." We have replaced drunks and drug addicts with those who engage in "substance abuse." Instead of speaking of someone as a homosexual, we refer to such a person as "gay" or as engaging in "an alternate lifestyle."

Psychiatrists and psychologists are called, not to help us get rid of our sin, but to release us from our guilt. The problem is that we have come to see guilt as a disease rather than as a symptom.

The Bible teaches us that there is a reason and a purpose for guilt. Guilt acts as an early warning system. It tells you when you are moving into the realm of sin. If used properly, it can be used to bring you back to God.

Guilt is to your soul what nerves are to your body. When you put your hand onto a hot iron, there are tiny nerve endings in your fingertips that send an urgent message up your arm and to your brain. It says, "It is hot down there!" Your brain interprets that message and makes an immediate decision that puts the word out to all of the other parts of the body so that it reacts in a uniform way.

There are certain diseases that attack the nervous system, interrupting those messages that are sent to the brain. As a result, a person afflicted by such a disease feels no pain in his extremities. Such a person can easily cut a finger or a toe completely off without

realizing it.

Guilt is an early warning device. It lets you know when you are heading into trouble. But there is a danger. The danger is when you are confronted with the guilt and you do not listen. You begin to form calluses over your conscience. Before too long, you don't feel the guilt at all.

As we come to our passage in Genesis 42, we find that this hardening process had taken place in the hearts of the sons of Jacob. It had been over 20 years since they had taken their younger brother and, in a fit of jealousy, sold him into slavery.

You remember the story. Of the eleven brothers, Joseph was the favorite of his father. He was also one of the youngest. The fact that their father favored Joseph drove these ten older brothers insane with jealousy. It was in just such a fit of jealousy that they took him and threw him into a pit so that he would starve to death. When by chance they saw a caravan passing by on its way southward to Egypt, they pulled Joseph out of the pit and sold him into slavery.

When they returned home, they told their father a lie about having found Joseph's coat covered with blood and they suggested to him that he had been killed by a lion.

At first, the guilt of their deed must have seemed almost unbearable. As they watched Jacob grieve over his lost son, it would have broken their hearts. Time on time again, they would have found themselves on the verge of going to their father and confessing their terrible deed. But then, as the days and the months and the years passed, the guilt began to fade. Finally, it was all but forgotten. It is upon such a scene that our story opens.

## **GUILT FORGOTTEN**

*<sup>1</sup> Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, "Why are you staring at one another?" <sup>2</sup> And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die."*

*<sup>3</sup> Then ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt. <sup>4</sup> But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "I am afraid that harm may befall him." (Genesis 42:1-4).*

It was a time of drought. This was a deadly situation in a land that depended solely upon its agricultural economy. The first year would not have been too bad as there would have been enough food in storage so that the failing of the crops could be compensated for

through careful rationing. As the following year began, the drought showed no signs of drawing to a close. The famine swept over the land as once fertile fields and meadows were transformed into dust bowls. Entire forests withered and died. The small band of Semitic nomads living in the land of Canaan found itself on the verge of extinction. It is in this setting that Jacob calls his sons to himself. He has a plan.

1. The Quest for Salvation: *“Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die.”* (42:2).

The famine that had been predicted by the Pharaoh’s dream in the previous chapter was not limited to the land of Egypt. It took in other areas of the world as well. It did not take too long for the news to reach Jacob that there was food to be found in Egypt.

Accordingly, Jacob determines that his ten oldest sons shall go down to Egypt to obtain the needed provisions.

2. The Favoritism toward Benjamin: *But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, “I am afraid that harm may befall him.”* (42:4).

Notice what is happening. There is a new favorite son in the family. His name is Benjamin. His name means literally: “Son of my right hand.” The right hand is the place of honor. It is the position of one who is favored.

By this time, Benjamin is over 20 years old, but he is still the baby of the family. For this reason, he will be kept home.

## **GUILT ACCUSED**

*5 So the sons of Israel came to buy grain among those who were coming, for the famine was in the land of Canaan also.*

*6 Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. 7 When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly. And he said to them, “Where have you come from?” And they said, “From the land of Canaan, to buy food.”*

*8 But Joseph had recognized his brothers, although they did not recognize him. 9 And Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about*

*them, and said to them, "You are spies; you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land." (Genesis 42:5-9).*

On a fateful day, the small band of brothers arrive at Egypt. They have made the long trip all the way from Canaan. They are in a strange land with strange customs and strange people. Here it will be required that they appear before the royal representative of the Pharaoh.

They are outsiders and they must receive special permission in order to be able to conduct their business in this land. They are conducted into the presence of his highness, the royal official of the great Pharaoh, the prime minister, Zaraphenath-paneah.

You are probably thinking to yourself that you have never heard of Zaraphenath-paneah and you are not alone. The sons of Jacob had never heard of Zaraphenath-paneah, either. The reason they had not heard of Zaraphenath-paneah was because they had not read Genesis 41:45 where Pharaoh himself gave this name to Joseph.

They are ushered into the presence of the great Zaraphenath-paneah. They have received instructions on how to conduct themselves in his presence and they bow to the ground before him.

He is tall and imposing, garbed in the royal dress of a high noble of Egypt. His eyes are sharp and piercing, missing nothing. He gazes at them intently as they present their petition to his interpreter. Then he speaks. They listen to his voice speaking in commanding tones and then the interpreter relays a distressing accusation: *"You are spies; you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land."*

This accusation was not all that far-fetched. Egypt had no fortifications separating her lands from those of the Bedouin tribes to the east. Within a hundred years of this time, a group of Semitic invaders known to history as the Hyksos will invade the land of Egypt and conquer the lands around the Delta and will rule for 150 years.

As Joseph makes this accusation, he has another purpose in view. He has already recognized his brothers. They have not changed much in the last twenty years. They are still wearing the garments of shepherds of Canaan.

This brings us to a key question. What is Joseph's purpose in accusing his brothers? I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that, had it been me, then I would have been out to get those brothers. But I want to suggest that Joseph has another purpose in view besides revenge.

It seems to me that he wants to allow his brothers to experience what he has experienced. Why? Is it so that he can get even with them? No. I think it is so that they can

experience repentance for their deeds.

There is a lesson here. It is that you cannot experience repentance from your sins until you have come face to face with the fact that you really have sinned. One of the problems with our evangelism today is that we are trying to save people who don't know that they are lost. We are trying to make people well who don't know they are sick. We are telling people about the good news of the gospel and they don't yet know the bad news of their sin.

Maybe you heard the story of the Roman galley slaves who were assembled before their taskmaster. He announced, "Men, I have some good news and I have some bad news. The good news is that we have slaughtered a wild boar and you can eat all you want tonight and we have opened a keg of ale and you can drink all you want tonight. The bad news is that tomorrow the captain's daughter wants to go water skiing."

There is a principle here. It is that good news is good in direct proportion to how bad the bad news is that accompanies it. In our case, the bad news is really bad. The bad news is that you have sinned against a holy and righteous God who hates sin and who promises to pass judgment upon sin. The bad news is that the wages of sin is death and that God condemns sin with an eternal condemnation. The bad news is that you can't be good enough for long enough to please God, no matter how hard you try. The bad news is really bad.

But the good news is really good. The good news is that God has provided a way of salvation. The good news is that a Jewish carpenter died on a Roman cross and was buried and then He got up and walked again and He said that you could, too. The good news is that His death was a sacrifice for sins. The good news is that He calls all to repentance and that whosoever will come to Him will receive eternal life. The good news is that those who come to Him find entrance into God's forever family.

There are too many people today who are not ready to believe the good news because they haven't yet come to believe the bad news.

These brothers of Joseph are going to be told that he has forgiven them and that he has prepared a place for them to live in Egypt and that he has provided for their salvation. But they are not yet ready to hear that news. They first have to come to the place where they recognize how badly they have treated him. The fact that they have not yet recognized this is seen in the way they deny their guilt.

## **GUILT DENIED**

*10 Then they said to him, “No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. 11 We are all sons of one man; we are honest men, your servants are not spies.”*

*12 Yet he said to them, “No, but you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land!”*

*13 But they said, “Your servants are twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more.”*

*14 And Joseph said to them, “It is as I said to you, you are spies; 15 by this you will be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here! 16 Send one of you that he may get your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. But if not, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.” 17 So he put them all together in prison for three days. (Genesis 42:10-17).*

Over their repeated objections, the ten brothers are arrested and interned in the Egyptian prison. For three days they have nothing to do but sit and think about past events. As they think about these things, they begin to remember their sins from long ago.

There is a law of association at work.

- They are in Egypt, the very place into which they had sold their brother into slavery.
- They have come to Egypt at the behest of their father, just as Joseph had once come to find them in accordance with Jacob’s orders.
- They have been accused of spying in the same way they once accused Joseph of spying on them after he had given their father their evil report.
- Their protestations of innocence have been ignored in the same way they once ignored the cries of their own brother.
- They have been cast into prison, just as they once cast their brother into a pit.

The brothers were placed into prison for three days.

- Abraham had come to Moriah to sacrifice Isaac on the third day.
- The butler and the baker each had the fulfillment of their dreams after three days.
- Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days

Ultimately, this looks to the One who was in the heart of the earth for three days and who then rose again from the dead so that we might be free from our imprisonment.

## **GUILT REMEMBERED**

*18 Now Joseph said to them on the third day, "Do this and live, for I fear God: 19 if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, 20 and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die." And they did so.*

*21 Then they said 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."*

*22 And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood."*

*23 They did not know, however, that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between them. 24 And he turned away from them and wept. But when he returned to them and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. (Genesis 42:18-24).*

After the three days have passed, the brothers are once again summoned before the royal official. They are informed that there has been a change in plan. Instead of nine brothers remaining in prison while one returns home, only one shall remain in prison while nine return home.

The law of association is still at work here. In the same way they once returned home without Joseph, so now they will return home again minus one brother.

1. *An Admission of Guilt: Then they said 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).*

For the first time, these brothers begin to show some kind of remorse for their past deed. They turn to one another and they confess the reality of their sin.

Are they truly repentant? I do not know. They see the cause and effect results of their sin coming back upon themselves and they are remorseful over the negative consequences they are now experiencing. But are they truly repentant?

That really isn't the important question. The real question is whether YOU and I are truly repentant over our sins or do we merely sorrow over the negative consequences that come our way.

2. *An Accusation of Guilt: And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood." (42:22).*

Blame has been called the gift that keeps on giving. It is seen here as Reuben takes the opportunity to say, "I told you so!"

Reuben was the oldest of the brothers. He was the one who had talked the other brothers into throwing Joseph into the pit instead of murdering him outright. Reuben had planned on secretly coming back and rescuing Joseph.

The problem with Reuben was that he lacked moral courage. He lacked the courage to stand up against his brothers and defend Joseph. Now he continues to show that same lack of responsibility as the other brothers confess their sin.

Can I tell you something about Reuben? He is going to lose his birthright. Even though he is the oldest, it will not be from his tribe that the royal line arises. King David will not be descended from Reuben. Messiah will not come from his line.

There is a lesson here. God doesn't begin to use you as a leader until you begin to accept responsibility for your own actions. Leaders are liable and a real leader recognizes that fact and owns up to it.

This is also inherent in the very definition of a Christian. A Christian is a person who agrees with God that he is a sinner who is without excuse. He is one who confesses -- who agrees with God -- concerning his sin (1 John 1:9). When he does that, God is faithful and just to forgive that sin.

3. An Association with the Guilty: *And he turned away from them and wept (42:24).*

There is something special here in the tears of Joseph. We have already seen that he is testing his brothers. He is confronting them with their guilt. But do not make the mistake of thinking that he is not emotionally involved. He hears their confession and it breaks his heart.

God is like that. When He confronts you with your sin and your guilt, He is not merely a disinterested spectator. He is not the image of a bored cop writing out a traffic ticket. He cares. He mourns and is grieved over your sin.

## WHERE GUILT MEETS GRACE

*25 Then Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain and to restore every man's money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. And thus it was done for them. 26 So they loaded their donkeys with their grain, and departed from there.*

*27 And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money; and behold, it was in the mouth of his sack. 28 Then he said to his brothers, "My money has been returned, and behold, it is even in my sack." And their hearts sank, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, "What is this that God has done to us?" (Genesis 42:25-28).*

The nine remaining brothers load up their newly acquired provisions and begin the long trip back home to Canaan. Perhaps several days pass before one of them happens to check his sack of grain. Looking within, he finds more than he bargained for. Lying inside the bag along with the grain is the money that he has paid.

Money was not actually used at this point in history. The Hebrew uses the word *keseph*, literally, "silver." It will be another eight hundred years before someone gets the idea of minting coins. Pieces of silver would instead be parceled out in accordance with its weight.

One of these brothers has found his money returned to him. The rest of the brothers will ultimately find the same thing, but at this point, they do not apparently think to look. It does not seem to be that which is a deliberate act of the Egyptians. After all, Egyptians are not in the habit of giving away free money.

Notice what is their reaction to this news. You would think they would be delighted to learn of this. If you happened to find a hundred dollar bill in your bag of Burger King, it would not necessarily cause your heart to sink. But this is not good news to these brothers. Their nerves have already frayed by what has happened back in Egypt. This only serves to make it worse.

There is a principle here. It is that the grace of the King is only good news when guilt has been resolved. We've been talking at length about guilt. One thing we ought to understand is that God never meant for you to continue in your guilt.

We said that the bad news is a lot worse than you ever realized. The bad news is that you are guilty. The bad news is that you have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. The bad news is that the wages of sin is death.

The good news is even better than you ever realized. The good news is that God took your guilt and nailed it to the cross. If you have come to Jesus in faith, believing in Him as your Lord and Savior, then you have been set free from sin and from guilt. He took all your sin and your guilt and He credited it to Jesus Christ. Then He took the righteousness of Christ and He credited it to you.

You have been credited with the very righteousness of Jesus Christ. When God looks at

you, He says, “Justified! Declared righteous.”

*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21).*

This is what we call the gospel. It is good news. But it is only good if you have come to the King. If you have not, then that which is good news to believers is bad news to you.

*He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:18).*

Have you been burdened with guilt? If you have not come to Christ, then let that guilt drive you to the cross. Believe the gospel and find release from that guilt.

On the other hand, there are those who are carrying around that same load of guilt even though they have come to Christ. Perhaps it is the guilt of something that happened a long time ago or maybe it is the guilt over an ongoing situation. Such guilt can feel choking to the one who is overwhelmed with its hold. To such a one, there is a word of exhortation.

*It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1).*

If you are a Christian, then you have a special calling. You have been called to be free. You have no business carrying around a burden of guilt. You go back to the cross and you leave it there. It doesn't belong to you any longer.