

# The King's Heart Test

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[0:00] Guilty. Maybe something you did, something you said, maybe a long time ago, maybe recently, And there's a voice in the back of your head that just won't let you forget. It's not a nice feeling, is it?

None of us want to have a guilty conscience. But what about when we need one? What if that voice is telling us the truth? Do we tell it just to keep quiet or treat it perhaps as an illness, with distraction, self-pity, drink, medication? Or do we let conviction do its steady work on us, humbling us for what we've done wrong, prompting us to change? Tonight in our episode of Jacob's family, the camera shifts, doesn't it, from following Joseph in the palace to following his brothers. Even though they come and go from Joseph without them knowing it, it's the brothers, isn't it? They're always in shot. They're the ones that Genesis wants us to look at this evening.

Now, 20 years have passed since that terrible incident. We saw these guys, they kidnapped their younger brother. They flirted, didn't they, with killing him. Instead, they sold him into slavery for money, and then they tricked their father into believing that he had been killed and eaten by a wild animal. So, you know, if this was a BBC Panorama interview, isn't that where we would want to begin?

That's the question we would put to them, isn't it? Are their past sins now so far behind them that they have just forgotten the evil that they did? Or have they now changed beyond recognition, humbled, sorrowful over their past wrongs? Or perhaps somewhere in between? Is their guilt still hanging over them, niggling at their hearts after all this time, but hasn't yet really taken full effect in their life? I think that's the question Genesis wants us asking tonight, because it's the very question I think Joseph is asking tonight. He's in a position of great power, not only because he's the governor and he holds the keys to the grain store, but perhaps even more so because he recognizes his brothers, but they don't recognize him. They say, don't they, knowledge is power. And Joseph uses the power of his knowledge to test them. Verse 15, by this you shall be tested. He makes a plan so that your words may be tested whether there is truth in ye. He has a question, doesn't he?

And it's this, they have claimed incredibly, verse 11, we are honest men. If we followed the story up to now, that hurts to hear, doesn't it? And yet three more times when they go home, they insist on this. Verse 31, 33, 34, we are honest men. Now it's so far from the truth, even their claim to be honest, isn't honest. But that word, it goes deeper than honesty. What is Joseph testing in them? Well, it's actually the same word that we find repeated again and again on page one of Genesis. When God created the world, we read, God said, and it was so. God said, and it was so.

[3:56] And it's that word so, or right, which is translated here, honest. God said, and it was true. It was right. It was as God said it should be. The brothers stand before Joseph and their father Jacob, whom they have wronged so much, and they insist, we are true. We are right. We are, as God says, we should be.

And these chapters 42, 43, and 44 next time are really all about Joseph testing that claim to see whether after 20 years there is any truth in it at all, or are they still the heartless men who would give up their brother all over again if the price was right?

In these chapters, then, we see the king's heart test, like a lie detector test, but for our very soul. And as these brothers have their consciences tested by the king, we too need to ask, I think, how our own heart bears up under his all-seeing eyes, how we respond as our conscience is tested by his word.

Four points for us tonight, then, and we'll move quickly, but beginning with Joseph's first instinct, I think, are their consciences seared? Now, for the last seven years, God's providence has been easy for Joseph. It's promised delivery time in his life, right? God said he would be raised up to a position of power, honor, and there he is. And God is going to continue to make good on his promises to Joseph, but now, I think, in a way that cuts across his happiness and comfort, right? Because far away in Canaan, the famine is beginning to bite, and news has reached the family of Israel that there's food in Egypt. So, ten of the brothers minus Joseph join the back of the worldwide queue to get grain.

And the idea of seeing Joseph again clearly has not crossed their minds. And Joseph, I think, wasn't prepared to see them either. Now, I'm sure since you spotted this last week, you haven't stopped thinking about it all week long, have you? All week long. Verse 51 of chapter 42, 41, sorry, verse 51. Joseph said, God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house.

[6:47] Really? Has he? Has he really put his family behind him for good? Before we answer, it's worth acknowledging that's more common than we would like to think, isn't it? Families that just don't talk anymore.

Is that Joseph? We've painted Joseph quite strongly as a type of Christ, and he clearly is. But it is worth saying, too, isn't it, that he is not Christ.

And it's okay to see chinks in his armor. Isn't it interesting that it's at this point, having to face his family again, who have caused all his suffering, that something un-Christ-like begins to show.

Let's have a look at verse 7, chapter 42. Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, And we say to ourselves, don't we, Oh, he doesn't mean it.

Right? He knows the promises, doesn't he? He gets the big picture. But it's only two verses later, look, in verse 9, that we see that Joseph remembered the dreams he had dreamed of them.

[8:02] And so I take it up to this point that he had forgotten, or blanked out, perhaps, that God had promised this day would come when he would see his brothers again.

And they would bow themselves before him with their faces to the ground. Perhaps with the rest of the world bowing down to him, he thought, Well, it's close enough.

But even once he's remembered the dreams and God's promise, through the dreams, he doesn't let up, does he? You are spies. You're just here to see how vulnerable our land is to invasion.

You're here to see the nakedness of the land. He locks in, doesn't he, with those accusations. He's like a Nile crocodile, isn't he, with that deer between its jaws. He won't let go.

Then he puts them all in prison for three days. It's impossible to think, isn't it, that as he turned the key in the lock, that he wasn't thinking of all those years that he had spent behind bars because of them.

[9:13] And for a moment, it looks like he's going to throw away the key. Verse 16, send one of you and let him bring your brother while you all remain confined.

I think we see some dark colors coming through in the palette of Joseph's heart here. Joseph had forgotten he would have to face his brothers again, and when he does, his heart reaction is stone cold.

If you need one more proof that Joseph wasn't pretending, just have a look at verse 18. What did he say at first? He said, didn't he, one of you go, the rest of you stay? Now what does he say after three days to reflect?

On the third day, he said to them, do this and you will live, for I fear God. If you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody, and the rest go, and carry grain for the famine of your households.

So see that now it's just one stay and the rest go, and take food back with you. Why the softening? Well, Joseph tells us himself plainly, verse 18, for I fear God.

[10:32] For I fear God. Which strongly suggests, doesn't it, that Joseph had spent those three days not sizzling with resentment, but rather bringing himself and his big feelings and resentment and anger and tears and wrestling them back under God, under his hand, and remembering who had promised this day would come, and had faithfully carried him through each day up until now.

And he was still at work for his good and his glory. Because in those three days, Joseph's heart softens before God towards his brothers, which I think teaches us two things.

Firstly, in any family, in my family, in your family, in God's family, in our church family, there are going to be deep wounds and hurts that go back perhaps many years, and we will sometimes have feelings of anger and resentment.

old scars and scabs get opened up, and so much coldness and harshness and spite can flow out of those wounds again.

We will find throughout our lives, we need to turn again and again to the only one who can fully heal those wounds. Joseph took his 20-year-old heart to the Lord, and after a few days, found that he was able to speak less roughly and more gently to those who had harmed him.

[12:14] He's still very tearful, isn't he? But he has softened. And as Christians, brothers and sisters, we need to learn also to leave our pain and grief in the Lord's hands like that.

If we have a right view of him, if we fear him, we won't assume his sovereign right to judge and condemn and punish others for their sins. When vengeance seems sweet, we need to hear him say, don't we, vengeance is mine.

It's the only way our hearts will soften towards those who've wounded us. And secondly, I take it that Joseph's time out with the Lord allowed him to be open to the idea that his brothers were not too far gone.

Their consciences were not seared. What do we mean by that? Well, we talk, don't we, sometimes about having asbestos hands, numbed to feeling, to pain.

Can't really feel in the kitchen, perhaps the hot water. Sometimes it's a gift, isn't it? Be able to stick your hand in and get that boiling egg out. You can't really feel it.

[13:27] Your hand is just numbed. But in a terrifying sense, the Bible also says that that can happen to our hearts. That's numbed to feeling, numbed to pain, asbestos heart.

It's a terrifying thought that we might trample down our conscience so many times that we just don't feel bad for anything anymore. Nothing can get through.

There have been stories in the news recently, terrible murders. I'm sure you've read at least some of them. And I don't know about you, the most horrifying sentence to read in those stories for me was this, they showed no remorse during the trial.

No remorse. Have Joseph's brothers killed their consciences like that? Well, Joseph's few days with the Lord in prayer gives him hope that, no, his brothers still have a working conscience.

And isn't that what we need when we start giving up on people to be reminded that the Lord is sovereign over people's hearts, both to harden and to soften?

[14:39] Which is what Joseph discovers as he comes back to test his brothers and finds their conscience is pricked? So Joseph says he'll let his brothers go on two conditions, that one of them stays behind, and they come back with their brother Benjamin.

Now, it's not the most obvious plan in the world. Why does it all seem to turn on Benjamin, right? Well, I think it's because Joseph sees himself reflected in Benjamin.

Of the 12 brothers, Benjamin is his only full brother, and they're both sons of Rachel, who Jacob loved best, right?

And it becomes clear in the rest of the chapter that now with Joseph gone, Benjamin has been promoted to first place in his father's affections. Now it's Benjamin that Jacob won't let go on a journey.

So the test, I think, is something like this. Will the brothers treat first Simeon the hostage, and then Benjamin, the new number one, in the same way they treated him?

[15:47] Will they give up their brother if it serves their interests? And will they treat their grief-stricken dad the same way they treated him 20 years ago and break his heart into another thousand pieces for their own selfish gain?

The way they respond to this test will tell Joseph everything he needs to know about whether they are now honest or righteous men. And the first signs are promising, aren't they?

Verse 21, hearing the test, what do they say? They said to one another, in truth, in truth, we are guilty concerning our brother in that we saw the distress of his soul, and when he begged us, we did not listen.

That is why this distress has come upon us. See, because the king is wise, gentle, and loving, he has reached out and touched the raw nerve under the layers and layers and layers of hardened skin with his words.

The king's test has done its work. It has pricked their conscience. And we can see that that is now not out of a desire to get back at them or to torment them, but it is because he really cares about them.

[17:07] It's a poignant moment, isn't it? Joseph is a fly on the wall of their conversation. They don't know that he can understand them. They don't know who he is. But all the while, he is overhearing them say this.

We are guilty. Recounting what is clearly curdled in their own minds into a painful memory of his distress, begging them, and they ignoring him.

What did we do to him? How tempting might it have been for at that very point, for Joseph to reveal his true identity. To bring their guilt crushing down upon their heads, to get vengeance upon them, to cause them distress, for them to beg him for mercy and him to ignore them.

But that is not his heart, is it? Rather, what? He turned away from them and wept. I wonder, when your conscience is stirred or it's pricked by God's word, you know you've got it wrong.

I am guilty. Who is it you imagine on the other end of that conversation? I think we often imagine that the angry, vengeful, cold king of verse 7, treating us as strangers, speaking harshly to us, when really, brothers and sisters, it is the gracious, wise, weeping king of verse 24, who graciously, in his love, confronts us with our guilt and cuts through the hardness of our hearts in his mercy.

[18:47] It's a really important difference because we recoil from the first, don't we? The cruel discipline of somebody who is against us.

But we would welcome the second, would we not? The loving discipline of one who is unchangeably and steadfastly for us. And yet we won't welcome it if behind his fatherly hand we imagine a scowling face.

Friends, when we feel his eyes upon our secret sins and we know we are guilty, what should we picture? But the one here who wept over his brother's sins, the one who, as he looked upon the sins of God's old covenant people over Jerusalem, wept and said, how often, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings?

The one who wept in the garden as he saw the compressed weight of God's wrath coming down upon our sins and said and prayed, if it is possible, let this cup pass, but not what I will, but let your will be done.

Friends, he convicts us of our sins because his blood has set us free from their power. He disciplines us because he loves us.

[20:13] He cuts us in order to heal us. Who he is and how and why he does that changes everything, doesn't it, about how we should then respond when he confronts us with our guilt.

I think, too, there are times when we'll need to do that to each other, to give the loving challenge. And how we do that really matters.

Do we do it with tears of sorrow or with a tantrum? Out of love or out of spite? They are not the same thing, are they?

How often have we come in like Joseph in verse 7 speaking roughly when we need to come in like Joseph, verse 24, weeping tears? And friends, if you are challenged like that by a brother or sister over a wrong or pattern of sin, don't hear their words and read into them anger, hostility, coldness.

Don't recoil from love because it feels like harm. You being cut with a scalpel and being cut with a switchblade feel the same, don't they?

[21:24] But they are two very, very different things. Who does it? Why? How they do it really matters. See who's holding the knife. Understand why they are doing it.

Don't pull back if your conscience is pricked or stirred, but welcome it because that's the right kind of pain, isn't it, that leads to our hearts being healed.

And that is what we see next in the brothers, conscience carried. The brothers do lean into the pain and they have this dawning sense, I think, of something Joseph's known for a long, long time, the fear of the Lord.

Now, Joseph's put their money back in their bags and as one of them on the way unzips his bag, what does he find? His money. Now, this was not the age, was it, of cyber security and fraud prevention, right?

They could have gone on home, pocketed the money with a big, loud cheer and never told anyone there was a mistake on their end, right?

[22:32] We paid. Instead, we read verse 28, at this, their hearts failed them and they turned trembling to one another saying, what is this that God has done to us?

Now, this is a big, huge change of heart, isn't it, for these guys who once sold their brother for silver coins and laughed all the way to the bank. Indeed, they dread now to think that their brother will be forfeited because of this money.

They go home to Jacob and twice tell him they would give their own lives and families to redeem Simeon by taking Benjamin and returning them safely. Reuben first, verse 37, Reuben said to his father, Judah, kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you.

Put him in my hands and I will bring him back to you. And then Judah, 42, verse 9, I will be a pledge of his safety.

From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, let me bear the blame forever. Both these men were deeply complicit in causing Jacob's grief, grief so deep he now can't let Benjamin go.

[23:49] Judah is the one who came up with the plan in the first place to sell Joseph for money. Now they clamber over each other to guarantee their youngest brother's safety.

We asked the question, didn't we, all those weeks ago, am I my brother's keeper? 20 years ago, I think these men would have said no.

What about now? I think they would say yes. Their change of heart has come about not by accident, has it, but because the king has brought them under conviction.

And so, friends, do not underestimate the power of a conscience that has been stirred by Christ's word. Don't silence it, don't suffocate it, don't drown it out.

let your godly grief lead you to repentance. That is why the king convicts our hearts so that we might grow more into his likeness. Remember, all the way back that it was because Joseph loved his father and because he loved his brothers that he went after them in the first place.

[24:58] Now they are beginning, aren't they, to think and feel and act like Joseph towards their father and their brothers. I wonder in passing tonight, could you say, could you honestly say, as you search your heart before God, I am my brother and my sister's keeper.

Or to flip it around, I wonder if we were to ask the brother or sister sitting next to you or sitting around you or others in this church, are you, are they your keeper?

Do you feel that they are committed to you, that they would lay down their life, put their interests on hold for you, that they count you more significant than themselves in this church family?

It's deeply searching question, isn't it? Am I my brother and my sister's keeper? I trust that many of us would say yes. But what would it take, brothers and sisters, for others around you to begin to feel that same self-giving love of Christ for us, of Joseph for his brothers?

Am I my brother's keeper? Once the brothers arrive back in Egypt with Benjamin, they're waiting for Joseph and they try, don't they, to return the money only to find that they're off the hook.

[26:28] Presumably Joseph covered the cost of the grain last time, but I think it's significant that it's only when they try to return the money that Joseph releases Simeon back to them.

So Joseph is watching what they do with the money, isn't he? And it is clearly a big deal to him. They've chosen to bring it back rather than to keep it and give their brother up because it tells him his heart test is working.

Through his conviction, they are becoming men who can say, we are honest. We are true. We are right. We are what God says we should be because now we would sacrifice our selfish gain out of love for our brother.

Too often, don't we? Too often, I think we stop short of repentance because we think to ourselves, well, I don't need to feel guilty. I don't need to feel guilty about this because Jesus has dealt with my sins.

Yes, he has. But, friends, that misses the point, I think, of what Christ is doing as he tests our conscience. He's not doing it to condemn you because there is no condemnation.

[27:42] He tests our conscience so that we would be driven to change and become more like him. When we ignore it, that guilt, it only builds up. It becomes paralyzing.

It hangs over us. It suffocates our spiritual life. Sometimes we do have false guilt and for that, we need to know Christ's deep and profound free forgiveness for us, don't we?

But too often, I think, we get comfortable living in real shame for things that we know we need to put right but actually don't, rather than respond to his conviction with repentance and change and faith that we really can change and grow and become more like Jesus, our Savior, because of his gracious and loving discipline in our life.

Friends, he loves us too much to leave us as we are. So don't stay where you are in shame but respond to his conviction, turn around and walk in a new way.

Let your conscience carry through into your life, work, relationships. And if you're not a Christian here and you haven't yet done that, please don't ignore his prompting of you, his tugging at your heart, your conscience, whatever's in your past, whatever is the worst thing that you've ever done, whatever you've got wrong this week, King Jesus would not have you get comfortable with that but would unsettle you so that you find your rest in him.

[ 29 : 24 ] Only he can take your guilt away by his death and he is the only way that we can change and become new people. So if that's you tonight, would you turn, would you begin to walk in his new way, respond to the conviction of his word, his offer of forgiveness, his power to change you?

Which leaves us finally, I think, with a question. Conscience seared? No. Conscience pricked? Conscience carried? Conscience cleared?

With the money returned, Benjamin brought and Simeon released, the pressure begins to lift, doesn't it? This is the first time they've seen Joseph since he spoke roughly to them. But this time something has changed, hasn't it?

In some ways we've come full circle. They bowed down to him to the ground as before. Indeed, verse 28, they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves, but this time it has seemingly genuinely honest men.

And Joseph is overwhelmed to see that. His compassion grew warm. He sought a place to weep. More tears of love, of joy, of compassion from a righteous king towards his fallen family.

[ 30 : 44 ] And for the rest of the day there's pure celebration. Joseph throws a feast for them. It says they ate before him. He doesn't sit with them because of course he's still in disguise.

But he does send them food, doesn't he, from his own table. And as the brothers sit there from oldest to youngest feasting with the king, we read the men looked at each other in amazement.

Not so long ago they'd looked at each other and said, what did we do to our brother? Now they look at each other and ask, how did we get here?

There's a sense, isn't there, of we don't deserve this. How did we get here? We're not worthy of this grace. As Joseph just lavishes more and more of his plenty, more and more of his goodness on them.

Before Joseph's shadow loomed darkly over them, now his presence lifts their spirits with fullness and light and life. And so I think we can say, in a sense, that their conscience has been cleared.

[ 31 : 49 ] They've done right by Jacob and each other in a way that they hadn't done before. And while they don't know what connection that has to their past sins, someone does. And they are being blessed by him as they ate and drank and were merry with him.

friends, Jesus' grace, it does not depend upon our obedience. Otherwise, it wouldn't be grace, would it?

It would be payment or reward. Jesus' grace is free to us. We do not earn it. And yet, it is also true to say that as long as we are his and living out of step with his word, we will not experience his grace, his joy, his peace with the freeness and the fullness that he would give it to us.

If our trust is in Christ, our union with him cannot be broken even by our sin and yet our communion with him can. And I don't need to convince you of that because you know it yourself, don't you?

That distance, that coldness from him as you walk, not in his way, but in your way. How do we regain then that sweet communion with the Lord our hearts long for instead of knowing his hand of discipline upon us?

[33:14] How can we have a clear conscience before him today? The last time we finished with a hymn. Had a run of hymns this morning to you.

I think this one calls for a hymn as well, but a different one. When we walk with the Lord in the light of his word, what a glory he sheds on our way.

While we do his good will, he abides with us still and with all who will trust and obey. Trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey.

the brothers have done what Joseph asked and now they feast with him. Friends, would we know what it is to feast with Christ spiritually, to know his joy and gladness in our hearts, to be at rest in his presence because we trust in him and therefore love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.

And if we know what's brought us to that point, we will still look at each other in amazement and say, we don't deserve this even as we strive to serve him and obey him with our lives because as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, we know that it is him who works in us, both that we would will that and that we would work for that, for his good pleasure.

[34:50] Perhaps you're asking tonight, how can I be happy in Jesus? How can I have a fulfilled Christian life? Friends, there is no other way than to trust and obey.

Whoever you are, Jesus says, abide in me, abide in my love. By this you will love me, that you keep my commandments.

there is one more test to come for Joseph's brothers, one more heart-wrenching hurdle put before them to see whether they have become truly right and God-fearing men.

And so we are, I think, still left with that question, Mark, is their conscience cleared? We'll come back next time for the next episode of Jacob's Family, in the book of Genesis.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we would feast with you.

[36:04] We would know the joy of our salvation. Lord, we want to know a freedom with you, your filling of our lives.

and so, Lord, we ask your forgiveness for all the times that we have done our own thing, even when we have known that it is the wrong thing. Forgive us, we pray, when we have ignored your voice in our life.

Forgive us, we pray, when we have dampened down and trampled over the conscience that you have given us and the voice of your Holy Spirit in our hearts. Lord, we would turn and walk in your way and pray, Father, that you would grant us by your Spirit the strength to do so this coming week.

Lord, with Joseph's brothers, we can confess before you we are guilty, but Lord, we would be honest, we would be right and as you would have us to be. We thank you again that in Jesus that is how you see us because you've counted to us his spotless righteousness.

But, oh, Father, we thank you that that is not where you leave us and we would truly be righteous in ourselves. We would be right before you in all we say and do and think.

[37:24] So, sanctify us, we pray, by your Holy Spirit. Lead us to conviction that we might repent and believe. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.