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Good Conscience

HOW OBTAINED AND RETAINED
IN THE SIGHT OF GOD AND MAN.

John R Caldwell

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A Good Conscience

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THREE SCRIPTURE STUDIES

By **J. R. CALDWELL.**

I

An Evil Conscience.

THERE is that in every man which we call conscience. The heathen, who never heard of the law as given from Sinai, be he sunk ever so low morally, is not without conscience. "They, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another" (Rom. ii. 14, 15).

Nevertheless, conscience is just what knowledge or ignorance makes it; therefore, while its monitions may not be disregarded by any man with impunity, it is no more the rule by which a man is to be guided than the standard by which he will be judged. It is like the mariner's compass, which is invaluable if rightly adjusted, so

that the needle invariably points to the pole, but fatally dangerous if wrongly adjusted, certain only to lead astray.

Conscience may lead one man to prostrate himself before the wheels of Juggernaut: another may cause his children to pass through the fire, giving, as the demand of conscience, "the fruit of his body for the sin of his soul" (Micah vi. 7). Another may subject himself to severe and protracted penance; another may think, as Saul of Tarsus, that he "ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts xxvi. 9); and one may even think that by killing a Christian he is doing God service (John xvi. 2).

Such is the triumph of evil in an unbelieving heart, that the very last witness for righteousness becomes the advocate of sin—"their mind and conscience is defiled" (Titus i. 15). General reformation of moral character, good deeds, alms, prayers, religious duties, ordinances, penance, human priest or infallible Church—such are the promptings of a mind and conscience defiled, yet clamorous for that satisfaction which such expedients never can afford. At best they are dead works—the defiled and defiling offspring of a corrupt nature. But there is yet a lower depth of corruption. The voice that once was raised so mysteriously within, on behalf of God and righteousness, too often rudely silenced, refuses to speak again. The once sensitive conscience has become

duller and duller under each successive incrustation of defilement, until at last it is like the skin that has been "seared with a hot iron"—"past feeling" (1 Tim. iv. 2; Ephes. iv. 19).

"All things that are reproved are made manifest by the light" (Ephes. v. 13). To all who have, through grace, believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, there came a time "when free grace awoke them by light from on high." Such times of awakening are occasions of inestimable value, though often of no avail but to deepen condemnation. It was such when the accusers of the adulteress—convicted in their own consciences by the searching question of the Lord Jesus—went out from His presence one by one, leaving the woman alone with Jesus (John viii.). The light had awakened them, but they could not bear it; they loved the darkness, because their deeds were evil.

Such was the continual effect of the presence of the Lord Jesus among men; wherever He passed, the thoughts of many hearts were revealed—the light made manifest the evil, but the darkness comprehended it not.

After His rejection the Gospel was preached "with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven" (1 Peter i. 12). The word spoken in the power of the Holy Spirit still wrought as from the lips of Him who was "the Word made flesh." It was still "quick and powerful, sharper than any

two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. iv. 12).

In Acts ii., through Peter the Word went straight to the conscience—many were "pricked in their hearts"—they owned its truth, they sought not to justify themselves. The light had searched them and shown them their sin, yet they sought not to escape again to the darkness, but to be healed in the light, and soon, through the Gospel of the grace of God, their anguish gave place to gladness. Now they are children of *the light*, no longer of the night or of darkness; light is their *home*. Walking in the light, as God is in the light, they "have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth them from all sin" (1 John i. 6, 7).

Very different is the result in Acts vii. Again, through Stephen, the Word is with power; Satan's armour is pierced; the sword is irresistible; they are "cut to the heart." Precious opportunity of salvation—the Holy Spirit had convinced of sin. Conscience from within echoed the accusations of the Word; but, hating the light and embracing the darkness, with all the energies of satanic madness they gnashed on Stephen with their teeth—cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, ran upon him with one accord, cast him out of the city, and stoned him.

The effects of conviction by the Holy Ghost are invariably of the character of either one or other of the foregoing examples.

It is inevitably *salvation* or *hardening*. The minor features of each case may vary indefinitely, but the result will be the same.

On the one hand, the yielding and confession may not be so prompt and open, nor the peace and gladness so soon experienced, but there will be a yielding to the conviction, and peace in believing.

On the other hand, the opposition may not be so instantaneous or virulent; there may not be the outbursts of passion against the truth, but there will be the fatal quenching of the conviction sooner or later, and the consequent hardening of heart, as of metal that had been heated and cooled. Fearful will be the awakenings of conscience when the sinner is brought face to face with God the Judge of all. Sometimes even on earth its unavailing pangs begin, and men like Judas seek escape in death. But if God's provision for a sin-burdened conscience, even the precious blood of Christ, be rejected here, will not the memory of such folly gnaw eternally as a worm that never dies?

There is a solemn word thrice repeated in Romans i. 24, 26, 28, "God gave them up." This is a judicial act on the part of God, and is not put into execution until conscience has been knowingly and repeatedly violated. There is even in the natural man a certain

restraint upon excesses and criminality. Natural conscience witnesses against gross moral evils and thus restrains. But a time comes when violated conscience is silent and the man is given up. He becomes the abject slave of indulged sins. He may struggle to recover himself, but he is powerless. Vows, pledges, resolutions are of no avail. There is no help for him, but in the God whose holy claims he has outraged. Peradventure, God may yet give him repentance: blessed be His name, He has done so in many a hopeless case.

II

A Cleansed Conscience.

THE first requirement of a defiled yet awakened conscience is cleansing. For this God has made provision in the sacrificial and priestly work of the Lord Jesus. "For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the Blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the Living God?" (Heb. ix. 13, 14).

Nothing can satisfy the conscience but that which has satisfied the claims of God's righteousness. The gifts and sacrifices, under

the old covenant, "could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience" (Heb. ix. 9). "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins" (Heb. x. 4). And it may also be here observed, that if the provisions of the law failed to perfect the conscience, how much less will those expedients now resorted to by men in ignorance and self-will?

Was it ever heard that a conscience awakened by the light of God found rest in reformation? This may be well enough so long as it lasts, but what of the sins that are past? and what of the more subtle sins that are still inevitably found to lurk under the fairest and most blameless exterior? Or can religious duties and ordinances make the conscience perfect, so that the presence of God can be borne without a fear? Truly, they never did. Neither moral life nor priestly absolution ever availed to produce joy in the prospect of meeting God—for the former is short of His glory, and the latter is without His authority.

But all is changed when Jesus is seen as the Purger of sins. "Once, in the end of the world, hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb. ix. 26). "When He had by Himself purged our sins. He sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. i. 3). This is God's testimony to the work of His Son. God declares His estimate of the value of the

Blood of Jesus by telling us that it "cleanseth from all sin" (1 John i. 7). The demands of conscience cannot be holier than God or the law of God. Therefore, if it be shown in the Word of God that the claims of a just God and of a broken law are alike met and satisfied by the death of the Son of God, shall not this truth, the moment it is believed, be to the foulest conscience the very cleansing it requires, the very rest it seeks?

Moreover, it is just because the satisfaction given in the death of Christ, to God and to justice, is perfect and eternal that He dieth no more. Had the sacrifices under the law availed to take away sins, then would they not have ceased to be offered, "because that the worshippers, *once purged*, should have had *no more conscience of sins*" (Heb. x. 2)? "This Man has offered one sacrifice for sins for ever." He has entered into the holiest, "having obtained eternal redemption." We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ *once*"; and "by *one* offering He hath *perfected* for *ever* them that are sanctified." "Now, where remission of sins is, there is no more offering for sin."

The heart that has simply and fully believed this wondrous testimony of Divine grace need never again be troubled with the upbraiding of an evil conscience. He may forget that he was purged from his old sins (2 Peter i. 9), and, his eye being off the cleansing blood, conscience may resume its old accusations; for Satan's accusations of

the brethren before God, be they true or false, are echoed oftentimes in the heart. But the resource is ever the same; another sacrifice needs not to be offered; the failure is not on the part of God's provision, for it perfects for ever, but in the erring one having for the time suffered his vision of that perfect work to be obscured through unbelief.

We are therefore called, as worshippers, to draw near to God "in the full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water." As, in Numbers xix., the blood of the heifer was first sprinkled seven times before God, and then its ashes sprinkled with water on the unclean, so the Blood of Christ has spoken both to God for us, and to us for God. It has opened the way for us into the holiest of all, giving us title to be there in righteousness; and it has spoken peace to our hearts, giving us boldness and access with confidence, by the faith of Christ, and assurance of a gracious welcome there.

III

A Good Conscience.

MOST worthy of our special regard are the words of the apostle: "Herein do I exercise myself to have always a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men" (Acts xxiv. 16). "The end of the

commandment is love out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned" (1 Tim. i. 5). There is a great difference between a natural conscience which takes cognizance of outward transgressions, and a spiritual conscience which in the believer takes cognizance of things spiritual and heavenly, of which the natural man is entirely ignorant. The spiritual conscience requires to be instructed by the Word of God, and by the teaching of the Spirit. Apart from this, it is no safe guide. Impressions and impulses may prove to be utterly false.

The conscience of a believer, through not being enlightened by the Word of God, may be morbidly sensitive, supposing many things to be evil which are not so in themselves. This is called in Scripture a "weak conscience" (see 1 Cor. viii.), and is more liable to injury than the more enlightened.

But whether weak or enlightened, if the dictates of conscience be violated, the results are inevitably disastrous. A "weak" one may, through the indiscretion of one that has more knowledge, be emboldened to do that which his conscience disallows, and so may "perish" (1 Cor. viii. 11). An expression of the strongest kind, and doubtless denoting the extreme of destruction that can overtake a believer, and parallel with 1 Cor. v. 5, where one is "delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." So again, in 1 Cor. xi. 32, "when we are

judged we are chastened of the Lord that we should not be condemned with the world."

But one who "has knowledge" may equally expose himself to judgment if conscience be trifled with.

It is of God's appointment that "the faith," which is at once the shield and the charge, committed to the saints (see Ephesians vi. 16 and Jude 3) cannot be held except in a good and pure conscience. Let this be put away, and all is gone. So was it with Hymenæus, who introduced the heresy that "the resurrection was past already" (2 Tim. ii. 18). Having put away a good conscience first, the shipwreck of the faith necessarily followed. He, too, was "delivered unto Satan" that he might "learn not to blaspheme" (1 Tim. i. 20). And doubtless such is the history of many a one who has been carried away with "divers and strange doctrines." Conscience has first been trifled with, and shipwreck inevitably resulted.

To maintain a good conscience involves incessant exercise of soul. If it be not exercised it will soon become phlegmatic. Paul knew this, and exercised himself, and exhorted Timothy also to exercise himself unto godliness (1 Tim. iv. 7). Not otherwise could they be vessels fitted for the Master's use.

It has been observed that the threefold offices of the Lord Jesus, as prophet, priest, and king, answer to the needs of the understanding, the conscience, and the will of men.

First, as prophet: by the Word He enlightens the understanding; the result of this is an awakened conscience. Then appears His priestly and sacrificial work: to give the heart that release from an evil conscience, without which it could never draw nigh to God; and finally, the understanding being enlightened and the conscience purged, He asserts as Lord and King His rightful dominion. The will of the flesh is set aside, and the will of God approved.

Now, to an exercised soul it is indispensable that the Lord Jesus be known in the sufficiency of His priestly office. The moment there is conscious failure, communion with God is interrupted. It cannot be otherwise, for fellowship with God can only be in the light. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, *we lie.*"

Conscious of frequent iniquities, some have despaired of enjoying again that gladness before God which they only knew "when first they saw the blood." The result is, they have settled down to a low and carnal walk, joyless and fruitless, away from God, not without, it may be, some legal striving after holiness, but certainly without that joy and fellowship which is through grace the heritage of the saint. The fact is, whether they know it or not, the barrier to communion is a *defiled conscience and an unbelieving heart*, and the cause of this, so long continued, in spite, it may be, of prayers and tears, is ignorance of the grace that is in Christ Jesus,

ignorance of the fact that God has provided for us in His love "such an High Priest."

Defilement under the old Covenant attached to the flesh. The law regarding this is fully expressed in Numbers xvi., and elsewhere. Very various were the means by which whilst in the wilderness, such defilement could be contracted as debarred from the worship of the sanctuary. But God made one provision—the ashes of the heifer and the water of purification. Until the person defiled availed himself of this provision, vain were his washings and his tears. He first must learn that grace, through sacrificial death, has provided cleansing, and this we see in the ashes which tell of the fire that burned in the Substitute until its last spark was exhausted; whilst in the "running (or living) water" we see that which God has appointed as the means of conveying to the conscience the needed cleansing, viz., the Word of God which liveth and abideth forever.

Thus to apply the Word and the Blood to the conscience is the work of the Lord Jesus. For this He lives. He loved the Church, and gave Himself for it that He might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the Word (Eph. v. 25, 26). "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (John xv. 3). "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John i. 9).

The necessity for confession in order to

restore communion is beautifully shown in the 32nd Psalm: "*When I kept silence* my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long: for day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer." What a picture of a believer who, through sin and a defiled conscience, is in darkness of soul and under the chastening of the Lord. How, then, was he delivered? "I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I WILL CONFESS my transgressions unto the Lord, and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin."

But how common it is for a believer conscious of sin, with burdened heart to go and confess it to the Lord, and yet remain for days, or weeks, or months a stranger to communion or joy. And why is this? Is it not as though the Israelite, when cleansed according to the law, refused to believe that he was clean, and remained outside the camp, instead of drawing nigh in full assurance of faith? It is the privilege of the child of God to know assuredly that upon confession *he is forgiven*, as perfectly pardoned, as thoroughly cleansed as the Blood of Christ could make him. He may look to his feelings and to his failures, and still be dark, but if in faith he appropriate the words, "FAITHFUL AND JUST TO FORGIVE," then, like David in the hour of his pardon and his chastening, he may go into the house of the Lord and worship (2 Sam. xii. 13, 20).

But in the cleansing of the person defiled there was a further step. He was to wash his clothes and bathe himself in water, and then "at even" he should be clean. If this were not done, he could not be restored to his true place as a worshipper. And herein we find another hindrance, often preventing the child of God from enjoying fellowship in Spirit. The water still represents the *Word*. It is the means by which the believer is sanctified. "Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy Word is truth" (John xvii. 17).

There may have been under a sense of defilement the necessary confession—the application to the Great High Priest, and some fresh experience of the efficacy of the one offering—but unless this be followed by a practical turning to the Word, not merely for acquaintance with the mind of God, but for self-judgment, "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness," there cannot be that "walk in the truth" wherein alone the communion of the Holy Spirit may be enjoyed.



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