

A Good Conscience

*"Herein do I exercise myself, to have a conscience void of offence, towards God and towards man"—
Acts 24-16*

THE opening words of Acts 23 give the keynote of the life of the apostle Paul—

"I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."

Paul had made many mistakes in his life, and had been much criticized by his friends, and condemned by his enemies. But Paul knew that his motives were pure, and he never allowed personal interests to keep him from the path of duty.

Conscience implies the existence of a standard of principles; and like his free will, is part of a man's constitution.

The conscience of the great majority is related to nothing higher than the customs of the society in which they live. A man with a good conscience may act in a manner quite acceptable to his friends, yet it may not be pleasing to God. At one time Paul was in that position, as he says (Acts 26:9)—

"I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the Name of Jesus of Nazareth."

Paul knew, as we know, there is a day coming when we must stand before the Judge, and happy shall we be if in that day we can say with Paul—

"I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."

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What is conscience? Everyone has a conscience of some kind; but that does not mean that a person can know intuitively what is right or wrong. No one has that "light within" to say what he must do.

The fact that a conscience exists is one of the great problems of the evolutionist. A person can be hardened about what he says or does; but he will be aware of his wrong doing against those in whose society he is a member.

Paul's persecutions of God's people were to him a conscientious carrying out of his duty, but he confessed later that he did it in ignorance and unbelief.

When the Truth enters the heart, the conscience becomes more sensitive. It is no longer a question of feeling a sense of guilt or of innocence towards men's laws; but a matter of relationship to God's laws. That being so, the conscience will either shock or tranquilize according to our words and deeds.

When the law of God is understood and loved, then the conscience, which is a delicate part of the mental makeup, will seldom go wrong. We have an example of that condition in Ruth 1:15-16. Ruth is one of the 4 women (besides Mary) mentioned by Matthew in his genealogy of Christ.

When Naomi heard that food was again plentiful in Judah she decided to return to her people. Her 2 daughters-in-law accompanied her some distance; then Naomi counseled them to return to their father's house. Then they wept and Orpah kissed Naomi and returned. Orpah returned to her people and her gods. But Ruth said—

"Intreat me not to leave thee. Whither thou goest I will go; thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God; where thou diest will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so and more also, if aught but death part me and thee."

Then in 2:12 we have the words of Boaz to Ruth—

"The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under Whose wings thou art come to trust."

Unlike some mentioned in Scripture, Ruth showed no hesitation. She had found freedom in the company and faith of Naomi: freedom from evil, and purity of character. By the will of God her conscience revealed Whom she must serve. Just as Paul, Ruth could have said—

"Herein do I exercise myself, to have a conscience void of offence towards God, and towards man"

(Acts 24:16).

What an ideal outlook to have on life! If only we could live by that standard; to examine ourselves and have a conscience void of offence towards God and towards men. What wonderful people we would be in our characters!

The conscience is what might be called the inward monitor. So when we do wrong and excuse ourselves, the conscience will still have a sense of guilt which cannot be thrown off.

Sometimes we might like to have a very different conscience. Though we may try to keep conscience in the background, we would still hear the voice behind us say—

"This is the way; walk ye in it."

Life in the Truth after baptism should be a matter of preserving a good conscience: and of that Paul says to Timothy—

"Now the end of the commandment is love out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and faith unfeigned."

Love is very necessary in our walk in the Truth; and we notice that Paul puts love, a pure heart, and faith unfeigned, along with a good conscience. Faith and love are very important, without them we cannot please God.

We may have the conviction we are really doing our best but we need to be sure we have nothing to hide; that we are not following ulterior motives. We know that in pleasing God we will displease men.

None have ever left the Truth without having a troubled conscience. They know what they should do, but stubbornness prevents them doing it. They may hope for the best, but we read:

"Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure" (1 John 3:3).
—striving for freedom from evil, and to be worthy of that "Love the Father hath bestowed on us, that we should be called the sons of God." We need to keep in mind that Jesus Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example we should try to follow, for (1 Peter 2:23)—

"When he was reviled, he reviled not again; when he suffered he threatened not; but committed himself to Him that judgeth righteously."

Who of us has not failed to observe the ways of the worldly minded? And we read (1 Peter 4:4):

"Wherein they think it strange that we run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you."

And Peter continues (v. 12)—

"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;

"But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that when his glory shall be revealed, ye

may be glad also with exceeding joy."

May we strive for purity of motive. May we ever pray for freedom from all foreign elements that would mar our conscience and our character. Again we have the words of Paul:

"I thank God whom I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience" (2 Tim. 1:3).

Let us examine ourselves, and "Our conscience let Thy Word reprove; convince and bring the wanderers back."

Whatever may be in the attacks of bitterness upon our personal way of thinking, or our way generally; by having a good conscience we can maintain a confidence and serenity of manner in spite of the injustice. Resignation to injustice can bring a sense of soothing comfort and satisfaction.

By being attentive to warnings, we can endeavor to keep a clear conscience; also examine our ways and our motives when our conscience gives the warnings. Paul says to the Corinthians concerning the unrighteous (1 Cor. 6:11)—

"And such were some of you, but ye are washed."

A purged conscience will be a good conscience; so we may profitably pursue our life in the Truth. Having a good conscience in the sight of God is of the utmost importance. The first of all the commandments is (Matt. 22:36-40)—

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God."

And the 2nd is like it—

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Faith is of the utmost importance, for without faith we cannot please God. And to make a 3-fold cord Paul adds—

"Love out of a pure heart."

So these 3 virtues, Love, Faith, and Hope, will go with a good conscience. We need to have a genuine conviction that we are really doing our best; and also to be assured we are not hypocrites; that our love and our service for the Truth is sincere.

It could be, and has been, just the opposite; so there is always a need for warnings and exhortations. Unless we come to the Lord's table for the right reasons; then it's possible we have the wrong motives.

Others sitting with us may not know, but God knows; and we will know ourselves because our conscience will trouble us. Instead of being moved by love of God and His Christ, we could be harboring an evil thought against others.

It would not be a new thing to come for appearance's sake, or to exchange the news of the day. From such ways it is so necessary to develop a good conscience; **and that can be attained only by cultivating a real love for the brethren and sisters; and offering real service to God in the work of the Truth.**

Being in the Truth, a good conscience will greatly fortify us against despondency, irritations and disappointments. It very often happens that words or actions of another in the Truth are taken in the wrong light, and magnified beyond all reason.

At such times a good conscience can be of great help and comfort. It can bring peace of mind and confidence, also strength of will to pursue an undaunted course of action, so that one can set aside the opinionated criticisms of the unenlightened and the careless.

It is **God's** approval that we seek after; and it is God we should strive to serve. Therefore we must be diligent to preserve a good conscience in the sight of God; that is of the first importance.

Such things as falsehood or hypocrisy cannot exist if we are sincere in our service to God. It cannot be a matter of convenience, or a matter of general policy; we must strive to do right for conscience' sake.

We must exercise a scrupulous self-examination, and be sure of having a conscience "void of offence towards God and towards men." In 1 Tim. 1:18 we have Paul's words—

"This charge I commit unto thee son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee . . .

"Holding faith and a good conscience, which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck."

What incredible folly it can be to lightly treat faith in the Truth! And again we have the warning. Who is there so strong that they can resist temptation? How true are the words of our Hymn 136—

*"Whene'er in error's path we rove,
The living way through sin forsake;
Our conscience let Thy Word reprove;
Convince and bring the wanderers back—
Deep wounded by the Spirit's sword,
And then by Gilead's balm restored."*

We hear nothing of the balm of Gilead nowadays; but the balsam tree is common in the Holy Land. The gum that comes from the tree has a very fragrant smell, but is very sticky, and can be drawn into long thin threads. Like other of the Palestinian herbs it has medicinal value.

The Ishmaelites who bought Joseph from his brethren were traders in the business of herbs.

Although Israel was many times sick spiritually, they despised the balm of Gilead. And though the Promised Land reflected God's love, Israel went their own way.

What does the balm of Gilead represent to us? It represents the enlightening and comforting Word of God. As Paul says—

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

Jeremiah lamenting the sins of Israel cried (8:22)—

"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"

No, there were none. Like the multitudes of today, Israel worshipped idols in place of the living God.

Can we imagine the position of a brother exhorting who has something on his mind and conscience? That can be very detrimental if he aspires to have at all times "a conscience void of offense toward God and man." Paul says (Heb. 10)—

"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus."

"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

"For He is faithful that promised. Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works"

(vs. 19-24).

To be acceptable in all our ways, our hearts must be sprinkled from an evil conscience. So— we have met again to celebrate the feast instituted by Christ Jesus.

Have we examined ourselves? What are our thoughts? What are our motives? What are our intentions and our purpose?

"Let Thy Word reprove our conscience." If so, we shall have gotten the golden opportunity to purify ourselves in the sight of God. Have we come here with a feeling of depression? A sense of neglecting to do something we should have done?

But if we are sincere before God as we partake of these emblems, and discern in them the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ, then we can leave this place with a sense of happiness,

feeling that inward glow of God's irradiating spirit in our hearts. So let us say with Paul (Heb. 13:18-21)—

"Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly . . .

"Now; the God of Peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, make you perfect in every good work to do His will, working in you that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

— C.H.T.
