

## A GOOD CONSCIENCE

“I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day” (Acts 23:1). This is the secret of Paul’s life. The conscience he refers to is not that of an unregenerated person but of a Holy Spirit-filled conscience. Bold in approaching God and perfect in his communion with Him, the Apostle’s regenerated conscience gives him no reproach. He does everything according to it. Never does he do anything that his conscience objects to, nor does he ever permit one item to remain in his life which it condemns. He is therefore bold before God and man. We lose our confidence when our conscience is murky. The Apostle “always (took) pains to have a clear conscience toward God and toward men” (Acts 24:16), for “if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:21-22).

Believer’s simply do not realize how very significant their conscience is. Many have the idea that as long as they walk after the spirit all is well. They do not know that an unclear conscience means loss of confidence in approaching God and that this loss in turn means disruption of one’s communion with Him. In fact, a muddled conscience can hinder our intuitive communion with God more than anything else. If we fail to keep His commandments and to do what pleases Him our monitor within shall naturally reprove us, rendering us fearful before God and hence keeping us from receiving what we seek. We can serve God only with a clear conscience (2 Timothy 1:3). An opaque one shall surely cause us to shrink back intuitively from God.

“Our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God” (2 Corinthians 1:12). This passage speaks of the testimony of conscience. Only a conscience without offense will testify for a believer. It is good to have the testimony of others, but how much better to have the testimony of our own conscience. The Apostle asserts that this is what he is boasting of here. In our walk after the spirit we need to have this testimony continually. What other people say is subject to error because they cannot fully know how God has guided us. Perhaps they may misunderstand and misjudge us just as the Apostles were misunderstood and misjudged by the believers in their day. At times they also may over-praise and over-admire us. Many times men criticize us when we actually are following the Lord; on other occasions they praise us for what they see in us, though it is largely the result of a temporary emotional outburst or a cleverly conceived thought on our part. Hence outside praise or criticism is inconsequential; but the testimony of our quickened conscience is momentous. We should pay extreme attention to how it bears us witness. What is its estimate of us? Does it condemn us as hypocritical? Or does it testify that we have walked among men in holiness and godly sincerity? Does conscience affirm that we already have walked according to all the light we have?

What is the testimony of Paul’s conscience? It testifies that he has “behaved in the world . . . not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God.” Conscience in fact can testify to nothing else. What it contends for and insists upon in the believer is solely for that life to be lived by the grace of God and not by earthly wisdom. Earthly wisdom is totally nil in God’s will and work. It equally amounts to nothing in a believer’s spiritual life. Man’s mind is altogether useless in his communion with God; even in his communication with the material world the mind occupies but a subordinate position. A child of God

lives on earth exclusively by the grace of God, and grace implies something entirely done by Him, with men having no part in it (Romans 11:6). Except as one lives exclusively by God—not permitting himself to take any initiative nor allowing his mind to have control over him—can conscience testify that he lives in the world in holiness and godly sincerity. In other words, it operates together with intuition. Conscience bears witness to everything done according to revelation in intuition, but it resists every action which is contrary to intuition, no matter how compatible it is with human wisdom. To sum up, conscience approves only the revelation of intuition. Intuition leads believers, while conscience constrains them to follow their intuition.

A good conscience which attests God’s good pleasure in the believer (since there is nothing between him and God) is absolutely essential to a life walked after the spirit. That attestation ought to be the believer’s goal: he should be satisfied with nothing less. This indicates what should be a normal Christian’s life: as it was the testimony of the Apostle Paul, so must it be with us today. Enoch was a man of good conscience for he knew God was pleased with him. This attestation of God’s satisfaction with us helps us to move forward. We must be very careful here, however, lest we exalt our “self” as though we have pleased God. All glory belongs to Him. We should take pains always to have a clear conscience; but should ours in fact be clear, we then must guard against the intrusion of the flesh.

If our conscience consistently attests God’s satisfaction with us, we shall have boldness to look to the blood of the Lord Jesus for cleansing each time we unfortunately fail. To have a good conscience we must not depart for a moment from that blood which continually and forever cleanses us. Confessing our sin and trusting in the precious blood are unavoidable. Moreover, because our sinful nature is still within us, we will not be able to recognize many hidden works of the flesh until we have matured spiritually. What we formerly considered harmless may now become sinful to us. Without the cleansing of the precious blood we could never be at peace. But once it is sprinkled on our conscience it shall continue to do its work of cleansing.

The Apostle confides that what he seeks is to have a good conscience towards God and men. These two directions, Godward and manward, are deeply entwined. If we wish to maintain a good conscience towards men, it must first be clear with respect to God. An unclear conscience towards God automatically brings in an unclear one towards men. Consequently all who want to live spiritually must seek to have a clear conscience towards God (1 Peter 3:21). This does not in any way signify that it is unimportant to have a good conscience before men. On the contrary, there are many things which can be done towards God but not towards men. Only a clear conscience towards men effects a good testimony before them. Man’s misunderstanding does not affect the testimony: “keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:16). Good conduct cannot appease an evil conscience; but neither will much reviling by man cast a shadow over a good conscience.

A good conscience also enables us to receive God’s promises. Christians nowadays frequently complain that their little faith is the cause for failure to live a perfect spiritual life. Naturally there are many reasons for not possessing greater faith, but the gravest of these is probably an evil conscience. A good conscience is inseparable from a great faith. The moment it is offended, at that very moment faith is weakened. Let us observe how the Bible joins these two elements: “whereas the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). Again: “holding faith and a good conscience” (1 Timothy 1:19). Conscience is the organ of our faith. God hates sin

intensely, for the apex of God's glory is His infinite holiness. His holiness will not tolerate sin, not even for a moment. If a believer does not purge-according to the dictate of conscience-everything contrary to God's mind, he shall lose his fellowship with God instantaneously. All the promises which God grants us in the Bible may be considered conditional. None are bestowed to gratify one's fleshly lust. No one shall experience the Holy Spirit, communion with God, and answered prayer if he does not deal away with his sin and flesh. How can we claim the promise of God with boldness if our voice within is accusing us? How can anyone, whose conscience does not bear him witness that he has lived on earth in holiness and godly sincerity, be a man of prayer who is able to ask God for unlimited rewards? What is the use of praying if our inward monitor reproves us when we lift up our hands to God? Sin first must be forsaken and cleansed before we can pray with faith.

We need to possess a conscience void of offense, not in the sense that it is better than before or that much evil has been done away but that it is without offense and confident before God. This ought to be the normal condition of our conscience. If we prostrate ourselves before it and allow it to reprove us: if we offer ourselves entirely to the Lord and are willing to perform all His purposes: then our confidence shall increase until it is possible for us to regard our conscience as void of offense. We dare to tell God that now we have nothing left which is concealed from Him. So far as we are concerned we know of nothing between us and Him. In walking by the spirit we should never permit the tiniest offense to stir up our conscience. Whatever it condemns must be confessed immediately, cleansed by the precious blood and forsaken, so that no trace be left behind. Each day we should seek to have a good conscience, because no matter how short a time conscience may be offended it renders great harm to the spirit. The Apostle Paul has set us a good example in always having a good conscience. Therein alone shall we maintain uninterrupted fellowship with God.

### **Conscience and Knowledge**

In abiding by the spirit and listening to the voice of conscience we should remember one thing, and that is, conscience is limited by knowledge. It is the organ for distinguishing good and evil, which means it gives us the knowledge of good and evil. This knowledge varies with different Christians. Some have more while others have less. The degree of knowledge may be determined by individual environment or perhaps by the instruction each has received. Thus we can neither live by the standard of others nor ask other people to live by the light we have. In a Christian's fellowship with God an unknown sin does *not* hinder communion. Whoever observes all the will of God known to him and forsakes everything known to be condemned by God is qualified to enjoy perfect fellowship with Him. A young Christian frequently concludes that due to his lack of knowledge he is powerless to please God. *Spiritual* knowledge is indeed quite important, but we also know that the lack of such knowledge does not hinder one's fellowship with God. In the matter of fellowship God looks not at how much we apprehend of His will but rather at what our *attitude* towards His will is. If we honestly seek and wholeheartedly obey His desires, our fellowship remains unbroken, even though there should be many unknown sins in us. Should fellowship be determined by the holiness of God, who among all the most holy saints in the past and the present would be qualified to hold a moment's perfect communion with Him? Everyone would be banished daily from the Lord's face and from the glory of His might. That sin which is unknown to us is under the covering of the precious blood.

On the other hand, were we to permit to remain even the tiniest little sin which we know our conscience has condemned, we instantly would lose that perfect fellowship with God. Just as a speck of dust disables us from seeing, so our known sin, no matter how infinitesimal, hides God's smiling face from us. The moment the conscience is offended immediately fellowship is affected. A sin unknown to the saint may persist long in his life without affecting his fellowship with God; but as soon as light (knowledge) breaks in, he forfeits a day's fellowship with Him for every day he allows that sin to remain. God fellowships with us according to the level of the knowledge of our conscience. We shall be very foolish if we assume that, since a certain matter has not hindered our fellowship with God for so many years, it cannot later be of any consequence.

This is because conscience can condemn only to the extent of its newest light; it cannot judge as sinful that of which it is not conscious. As the knowledge of a believer grows, his conscience too increases in its consciousness. The more his knowledge advances the more his conscience judges. One need not worry about what he does not know if he but completely follows what he already does know. "If we walk in the light"—that is, if we are walking in the light which *we have already*- "as he is in the light, we have fellowship with *one another*, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (though many are still unknown to us)" (1 John 1:7). God has unlimited light. Although our light is limited, we shall have fellowship with God and the blood of His Son shall cleanse us if we walk according to the light we have. Perhaps there are still sins today unremoved from our life, but we are not conscious of them; hence we can continue to have fellowship with God today. Let us keep in mind that, important as conscience is, it nevertheless is not our standard of holiness, because it is closely related to knowledge. *Christ Himself* is alone our single standard of holiness. But in the matter of fellowship with God, His one condition is whether or not we have maintained a conscience void of offense. Yet, having fully obeyed the dictates of conscience, we must not visualize ourselves as now "perfect." A good conscience merely assures us that so far as our knowledge goes we are perfect, that is, we have arrived at the *immediate* goal, but not the ultimate one.

Such being the case, our standard of conduct rises higher to the degree our knowledge of the Scriptures and spiritual experience increase. Only when our lives become holier as our light progresses can we preserve a conscience without offense. It shall invariably accuse us if we accompany this year's knowledge and experience with only last year's conduct. God did not cut off His fellowship with us last year because of our sins unknown to us then; but He certainly shall sever it today if we do not forsake the sins unknown last year but now known this year. Conscience is a God-given *current* standard of holiness. Whoever violates that standard is assumed to have committed sin.

The Lord has many words for us, but in view of the immaturity of our spiritual understanding He has to wait. God deals with His children according to their respective conditions. Due to varying degrees of knowledge in the conscience some are not conscious of sins regarded as very great by their fellow-believers. Hence, let us not judge one another. The Father alone knows how to handle His children. He does not expect to find the strength of "young men" in His "little children" nor the experience of "fathers" in the "young men." But He does wait for *each* of his children to *obey* Him according to what he *already knows*. Were we to know for sure (which is not easy) that God has spoken to our brother on a particular matter and that our brother has failed to listen, then we can persuade him to obey. Yet we should never force our brother to follow what our conscience says to us. If the God of perfect holiness does not reject

*us* because of our past unknown sins, how can we, on the basis of our current standard, judge our brother who only knows now what we knew last year?

In fact, in helping other people we should not coerce obedience from them in small details but only advise them to follow faithfully the dictate of their own conscience. If their volition yields to God they will obey Him when the Holy Spirit sheds light on the words clearly written in the Bible. As long as his volition is yielded, a believer will follow God's desire the moment his conscience receives light. The same is applicable to ourselves. We should not overextend ourselves to the point of exciting the strength of our soul to understand truths beyond our present capacity. If we are disposed to obey today's voice of God, we are considered acceptable. On the other hand, we should not restrain ourselves from searching any truth which the Holy Spirit may lead us intuitively to search. Such restraint would mean lowering our standard of holiness. In a word, there is no problem for that one who is willing to walk by the spirit.

The Spiritual Man by Watchman Nee