

The Conscience

STUDY TWO - THE FALLEN CONSCIENCE

Ray Bell ~ 8th September, 2016

The word 'conscience' is made up of two smaller words: 'con' meaning 'with'; and 'science' meaning 'knowledge'. the word itself therefore, means 'knowledge with'. As one person has put it, *originally* our conscience was simply "knowledge WITH GOD." However, it is no longer quite that simple. It *is* still knowledge, of what is right and wrong, good and evil. And it *is*, I believe, still knowledge "with God". But it is now, because of sin, one step removed.

Our 'witness' with God, and his with us, has been interrupted. There is now some separation between us which was not there in the beginning. We now see God and his law through the lens of our guilt- with a "guilty" conscience, and no longer enjoy the full, unadulterated communion the primal couple once knew.

Add to this the many and varied voices, 'other' than God's, vying for our attention, deceiving us, and placing doubts in our mind, together with our sinful desire to be independent of God, rather than with him, and **we find ourselves in a tragic and dire situation.**

The good news of the gospel is that God has not left us in that mess. He has sought us out, and made it possible once again, by his grace, that we might be with him. God does that for us and in us, so that we might delight in the prophetic anthem and promise:

- *"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people."*

But that prophetic anthem will be **far from music to our ears** if our consciences are not thoroughly cleansed by the blood of Christ. For sinners, with a guilty conscience, to be confronted with the presence of the Holy living God, is more like torture than delight! This can be seen clearly in Scripture: Revelation 6:15-17; Luke 5:1-11; Isaiah 6:1-7; **Genesis 3:1-13.**

It is in the passage from **Genesis 3** that we hear 'another voice' first enter the scene of creation and interrupt the blessed communion and 'witness' which God, the man and the woman once enjoyed. Through the twisting of God's own words, together with temptation and deception, desire is evoked- a knowledge and desire which is independent of God, to be independent of God. The conscience is awakened and is now accompanied by a voice other than the voice of God. And with it, our own desire, when combined with the false word of the serpent gives birth to sin. **Our now *misinformed* consciences are pricked into action and, from this point on, function out of guilt, not innocence.**

Even before God arrives on the scene, the dynamic of the guilty conscience is well and truly underway. Eyes are opened, and the primal couple realise they are naked! In their new found shame they now hide from one another. Their relational communion has been broken. **This is part of the death which God said they would surely die** should they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In verse 8 we find they not only hide from each other, they now attempt to hide from God! Their view of God has changed- dramatically! God has not done anything different to cause this! In their sin and shame, **their guilty conscience now fears God.**

But note how God comes to them, and how he calls to the man. He comes, not with words of harsh condemnation, but with words of searching, **seeking out the 'lost'!** - "Where are you!?" However, now the very sound of God is enough to make the man afraid, because he was naked, so he hid!

We see further still the effects of sin and a guilty conscience as God questions the man. Responsibility is dodged, blame is passed on, and the quivering finger is pointed towards those who were once rejoiced over. **This is the pattern** set for all fallen, guilty humanity, for those whose consciences have not been cleansed by the blood of Christ!

But in the thick of all of that messy relational breakdown, **God speaks words of hope, mercy and promise!** In his faithfulness and mercy, God provides for the man and his wife. Even in their sin, he covers their nakedness and shame by clothing them with animal skins (Genesis 3:21). The word itself is not there, but I think it would be fair to say that **God made the very first sacrifice.** God was the first to shed blood in his own very good creation! And he did it for us!– to cover our sin, and to provide a way for us to live in communion with him and with one another, as best as we could *for now*, without fear and shame.

This first sacrifice for sin **anticipates the final, once for all sacrifice** God would make in order to cleanse our consciences from sin, guilt and dead works so that we might once again serve him without fear of judgment. **In Genesis 3:15** God promises to conquer the source of sin and evil once and for all. Through an offspring of the woman, the head of the serpent would be crushed, but this offspring's heel would be bruised. Here God tells of the one who would come, his own dear Son, who would shed his blood, and suffer and die for us, in order that **the Ancient Serpent, the devil, might be defeated, our consciences cleansed, and our communion with God and with one another be fully restored and glorified.**

We do not need to live in the hopeless despair which so often accompanies a guilty conscience. Instead, we can trust God– that he is merciful and faithful and able to fulfil his promises. Like the psalmist (Psalm 32), we can acknowledge our sin to the Lord, and he will forgive us the guilt of our sin, lifting the weight of a heavy and guilty conscience from us.

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

*Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him
and in whose spirit is no deceit.*

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.*

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"

— and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

*...Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love
surrounds the man who trusts in him.*

*Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!*