



31st October 2021 | All Saints Day

Discovering the joy of a cleansed conscience

Main Point

We all struggle with feelings of guilt, but most often when we fail to follow our conscience. Unfortunately, our life experiences shape our conscience. Only when our hearts are cleansed by the precious blood of Christ can guilt be washed away. Only then are we free to follow our conscience.

Main Scripture:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Hebrews 9:14)

Introduction |

Imagine for a moment. You hop on a plane and off you fly to a new, faraway destination. The plane touches down. You alight and immediately you're engulfed by the strangeness of language, dress, smells and responses. You take a cab to your hotel and later, venture out for dinner.

But the menu? You can't read a word of it! What a huge relief to learn that your travelling companion has a basic grasp of the language. "Look! This word means 'beef' ... and I think this means 'potato'." At least you know there's something you can order!

Isn't this what we do when we find ourselves in unfamiliar situations? Don't we search around for something we recognise? Something that helps us link the known to the unknown?

Today we will be stepping into a foreign world, one with customs and traditions totally unfamiliar to us. Animals being sacrificed is simply not part of our lives! Yet, as we search for something that *is* familiar, we will discover the writer knows well the feelings we experience in our lives:

- The burden of a guilty conscience.
- The lingering feeling of not measuring up.
- The disappointment of failing but yet again.

In the book of Hebrews, we enter the strange world. Here, many held fast to the belief that the gods of the unseen realm demanded some sort of offering, often in the form of animal sacrifices, if their well-being was to be maintained, or crops were to grow, or livestock was to flourish. The flowing of blood was integral to these sacrifices.

We're not comfortable with such talk of blood. It sounds gruesome to us today. However, if we go back to when God originally explained the need for sacrifices, He told the people, "*For the life of the body is in its blood. I have given you the blood on the altar to purify you, making you right with the LORD. It is the blood, given in exchange for a life, that makes purification possible.*" (Leviticus 17:11)

So, for the Israelites, cutting an animal's throat and having its blood (that is, its life) drain from its body was a primeval symbol of the devastating results of their sin and selfishness.

For them, the sacrificial system was to heighten their awareness that, to break God's commands, was a BIG deal. In fact, later we read, the sacrificial system was symbolic for the present age. (9:9)

Tabernacle worship, with all its strange regulations/provisions, was to provoke greater sensitivity to one's inner life. The law and sacrifices were designed to stir within people's hearts, the expectation and hope of a far greater sacrifice to come.

But they completely missed the point. They thought God was only interested in ritual. That's why the writer of Hebrews asserts in chapter 10,

"The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason, it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. ⁴ It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."(Hebrews 10:1-4)

The old sacrificial system could never fully cleanse people's sins. The annual sacrifices served only as a reminder of how pervasive was their guilt and sin. For their sacrifices were not able to remove the guilt from their conscience nor delve into a person's inner being.

Point 1 | Our conscience assists us to gauge our inner sense of right and wrong, but it is shaped by the life experiences we have accepted and nurtured.

How do *we* view 'our conscience'?

We hear a lot about 'conscience' today. We hear politicians being able to make a 'conscience' vote, to decide for themselves which way to vote, based on their own moral compasses.

We often hear, "Listen to your conscience! It's always a good guide!"

That might well be for, again and again, the Apostle Paul urges us to keep our conscience clear before God and all people (Acts 23:1, 24:16; 1 Corinthians 4:4). He exhorts us to be aware of how we live, and how our actions impact the consciences of others (1 Corinthians 8 and 10).

So, even at a glance, such verses of Scripture point to the importance of listening to our conscience, and making decisions guided our conscience.

But, is our conscience always the best guide?

Before we categorically make such a claim, it is important we are aware of how vulnerable our conscience is.

Point 2 | The Problem: Strategies we draw on to appease our guilty conscience

Few are happy feeling guilty. It's awful. Don't you want to hide under the bed covers, forever? We can't do that, so we draw on well-used strategies to make ourselves feel better.

Let me give you an illustration of what I mean.

As you know, I run four times a week. This is a practice I have developed for my own mental, spiritual and physical health. I don't always enjoy it, nor feel like doing it, but after a run I feel so good about myself. I've kept all my carefully self-made rules. I'm impressed with myself.

Don't you feel good when you've achieved all you planned on doing? Don't you give yourself a pat on the back, like I do?!

We can easily transfer this into our spiritual lives. "I've been good. I've read three chapters of the Bible. I've prayed for an hour. I've given to those less fortunate. I've worked long hours in the Boutique. Surely, with all I've done, I am acceptable to God."

In some ways this is exactly how the Israelites were thinking. They religiously performed all the necessary rituals, kept all the rules, made sacrifices as required. They came to believe that their guilty conscience could be appeased by keeping all the rituals and rules.

How mis-guided they were. Did they not understand, *"The gifts and sacrifices that the priests offer are not able to cleanse the consciences of the people who bring them."* (9:9)

Outward rituals are external; they cannot change our innermost being.

Let's think again about my running routine.

It took five years to develop my running habit; it feels strange when I break it. For example, on Thursday, for one reason or another, other things got in the way and I didn't go for my run. It wasn't long before I was feeling guilty.

So, even if we are **mostly** successful in fulfilling what our conscience demands, there will come a day when we realise our inability to avoid the guilt of failure.

Now to a second strategy we use ... and this one is particularly deceptive.

Let's say, after my run, I began to put on to others my own expectations, that others should be running – or exercising – four times a week – and if they don't, they are indeed very lazy, even unhealthy!

Perhaps this is an extreme example, however, we can apply the same principle to any number of 'moral' standards we place upon others.

Do we not, at times, think our way of worship is the right way – in fact, the only way – simply because it is the style with which we are most accustomed?

Does our reading of three chapters of the Bible each day lead us to believe that all Christians should be reading vast slabs of the Bible?

This is surely what the Apostle Paul was addressing when he urged the Corinthians to sort out their leadership conflicts, writing, *"My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."* (1 Corinthians 4:4)

What Paul is emphasising is that our conscience is so easily manipulated by the influences of this world, it can never be the sole determining measure by which we gauge what is right and wrong (see 1 Timothy 4:2, Titus 1:15).

Certainly, the Holy Judge has looked at the heart of every one of us, and found us all guilty before Him. *"For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard"* (Romans 3:23)

So every single one of us is in desperate need for our conscience to be cleansed.

And praise God! The means by which our guilty consciences can be thoroughly and completely cleaned has come!

Point 3 | The Gospel Solution: Christ's pure blood has been offered, once and for all, to cleanse our corrupted consciences.

We read in Hebrews:

"How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" (Hebrews 9:14)

Our conscience cannot be made clean by living up to the standard of our own sense of right and wrong. For, we all know how often we fail at this.

Our conscience cannot be made clean by constantly striving to live by the Bible's standard of right and wrong – for this only leads to pride over our success or guilt over our failure.

We will never know the freedom of a clean conscience until we recognise that a clean conscience is a God-given gift; it cannot be earned.

When Jesus entered into the most Holy place in the heavenlies, and stood before His Father, He offered His pure blood as the only means by which our consciences could be cleansed. Think of it as heavenly-powered Dynamo!

And, as we read, Jesus' offering of Himself was God's plan all along: *"For God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time"*. (10:10)

Only then can we be acceptable in the sight of God. None of our doing, it is all of God. The One true and Holy Judge of the universe forgives us, and declares us 'accepted'. (See Romans 5:17)
So,

"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." (Hebrews 10:22)