

## Conscience

John 1 - 9.

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Article 37 of 47 **Short Meditations**

(Cavenagh, 1866.)

In John's Gospel, we see the Lord coming forth to *sinner*s. He is not so much the Healer of Israel, doing wonders of goodness in the bodies of men, cleansing the lepers, or restoring to health all manner of sickness and disease among the people; but it is rather *the soul* He seeks, and, therefore, it is *the conscience* He deals with. If the conscience be not before Him, He has not His subject or His material before Him. He has nothing to deal with, or operate upon, according to the character He is filling or sustaining.

This gives us to know what He is, and what are His purpose and His business in every scene. It may be a happy conscience, an awakened, uneasy conscience, a sleepy, unbroken conscience, or a bad conscience. He deals with all this variety — but in it all, we see conscience in some condition or another before Him.

In Andrew, we have a simple picture of a happy conscience, or a happy sinner. He had gone to Jesus as a sinner, for he had gone to Him as "the Lamb of God," and been therefore accepted and welcomed and entertained by Jesus; and he leaves Him happy. His heart is free; and he can therefore think of others, and make it his business to bring Jesus and other sinners, like himself, together. He preaches, as a happy sinner would preach. He tells the first fellow-sinner he meets, and that is his brother Simon, that he has *found "the Christ,"* language that bespeaks the satisfaction of his soul; and then, in full consistent benevolence, he invites Simon to come and share the Christ of God with him.

Here we see a conscience *at liberty*, because the sinner has found Jesus. But we have other conditions of it.

In Nathanael, the conscience had been *already awakened*. Under the fig-tree, I believe, he had been confessing himself a sinner, meditating on his condition before God — for it is the spirit of confession which, in Divine reckoning, makes us "guileless;" and that is the character in which the Lord recognises Nathanael. And the confessions of the lips are the utterances of the fragments of the heart. They are not real, if they be not this. Nathanael was, thus, a broken-hearted man. The Lord, therefore, had been in spirit already in company with him, before Philip called him, for the yearnings of an awakened soul are over dear to Him. He tells him so — as He had afore announced by His Prophet. "Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy, I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit." (Isa. 57: 15)

And on His gracious salutation, and letting him know that He had thus known him, Nathanael's soul is amazed. "Rabbi," says he, "thou art the Son of God, thou art the King of Israel." This was revival to his heart. The high and lofty One thus made good another portion of that same oracle of the Prophet; "to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones."

Now, this case shows us the Lord's blessed dealings with an *awakened* conscience, reviving and gladdening it, or making it a *relieved, delivered conscience*. In the Samaritan, the conscience was still *asleep*. It had to be roused, brought into God's presence with all its burthen and guilt upon it. The Lord, accordingly, forces her to discover herself. All the guilty secrets of her soul were dragged forth to the

light. But she stands — though overwhelmed, and though nature, for a moment, set itself to weave a veil between herself and her sin, she remains, as in the light that had detected and exposed her; *and that is the spring of her future blessedness* - for the Lord quickly fills that place with the tokens of His grace, and no longer allows it to be merely the witness of her guilt and shame.

There is something in this mysterious Stranger that works on her spirit — and she names the name of "Messias" in His ear, as One that, in some sense, she was looking for. Then, the conscience having been already stirred, and now the vessel opened, the Saviour reveals Himself; the Stranger proves to be the Messias she had named, and she is blest and satisfied.

Here we see what the Lord will do with a conscience that needs to be aroused, if the sinner, in spite of shame and exposure, will still abide His presence. For it is, surely, the way of blessedness, to value *Christ* more than *character*. We may say, in a sense, all depends on that. She no longer hid herself, but told her neighbours that she had been thoroughly exposed.

In the case of the Pharisees, or the accusers of the adulteress, the conscience is *bad*. A wicked purpose was filling their hearts all the time they were in the presence of Christ. What must He do with such a people? His presence shall be found intolerable to them. "Being convicted by their own conscience, they went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last."

What less could be done with such a shocking material? And so will it be by-and-by. All the wicked must perish from the presence of the Lord. Like smoke shall they be driven away. This was not the common way of Jesus; for He came not to judge but to save. "The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." But when these accusers of the sinner would fain have her at the fiery hill, and deal in law with her, then the Lord can turn the heat of that place against them, and give in them a sample of the day of doom, when the wicked shall perish from the presence of the Lord.

Unlike the poor Samaritan, they valued their character. Being exposed, they would not stand it. They would rather hide their sin, than have it published, and borne away. For such Christ has died in vain. They frustrate the grace of God. They sin against their own souls.

Thus, the Lord Jesus is seen to deal with the conscience in different conditions. With the awakened conscience He deals in all grace, giving it, as the contrite heart, to know that He revives it, and dwells on high with it. — With the sinner who will still abide with Him, though under the pain of being exposed and made naked to his shame, He will deal till He relieve and satisfy him. — With the wicked who practise their wickedness, and when exposed will leave Him, and rather keep their place and character among men, than reach the virtue of His presence, He shows that presence to be intolerable.

These are Nathanael, the Samaritan, and the Pharisees. He dwells in the high and holy place with the contrite — leads the poor convicted one who will still tarry with Him along the path of light and life — consigns to the fiery hill and to separation from Himself, the wicked who rather practise their wickedness than seek His presence, and value their character more than interest in Christ.

In these simple, unpretending narratives, we get these precious secrets of the ways of God in Christ, thus discovered to us. — There remains, however, another, which I must not pass. I allude to the Blind Beggar of John 9.

In him we see an *honest* conscience. It is not a happy, or an awakened, or a sleepy, or a bad conscience. We do not see in him any uneasiness about his soul. He had not been under a fig-tree with Nathanael — nor did the arrow of conviction enter him, through the word of Christ, as it had penetrated to the deepest secrets of the Samaritan. It is not in such quickened conditions we see him. But he is

honest. He is true to the light he has, and he will hold to the facts he knows. He suffers, rather than yield his integrity; and the Pharisees cast him out. Religiousness persecutes truthfulness — a common case.

Could Jesus leave such an one alone? Could He be indifferent to him? We know He could not. He heard that they had cast him out, and we may conclude that He at once sought him out; for we read, "when Jesus had found him." He made him His object — and the sight of Jesus and this beggar meeting for the second time is full of blessing and comfort.

As yet, this poor man knew Him only in His power to heal him. There had been no exercise of soul as a, *sinner*, though there was an *honest conscience*. But on seeing Jesus now the second time, outside the camp, his soul is exercised. Jesus calls him into this exercise. "Dost thou believe on the Son of God?" And the poor man is at once made ready to take anything from Jesus. "Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?" And Jesus reveals Himself to him as the One who had given him sight when he was blind, and now takes him up, when all were casting him out. "Thou hast both seen him," says the Lord, "and it is He that talketh with thee." The soul then discovers Jesus. Love and power thus combined, and thus acting in Divine virtue, was enough. "Lord, I believe," he answered, and then "he worshipped Him."

Thus He reached his soul, and dealt with him. And we are conscious, that while he was only an honest man before, he is now a quickened soul. — *For an honest conscience is not a saved soul.*

But in addition to all this, let me notice Paul's dealing with the conscience, in his Epistles. He sees none of these varieties. He sees the sinner just as he is, a sinner. He instructs the conscience how it should deal with God and His Gospel, rather than shows us, as in the Gospel, how Christ deals with it. He tells the conscience that it may enjoy a *purged* condition — not merely an awakened or convicted or honest condition, but a *purged* condition.

This argument is found in Hebrews 9, 10. The Apostle there teaches that we may have a good or a *purged* conscience, by faith in Christ, because after He had made His one offering, He entered the holiest place, never more to leave it as the Priests under the law left it, His offering being effectual to put away sins, and this, because of the admirableness of such a sacrifice as that rendered "without spot," and "through the eternal Spirit," and because this sacrifice met and satisfied God touching sin, answering and fulfilling "His will." The Holy Ghost Himself, in revealing the new covenant, or God's covenant, has established also the fact, that sins and iniquities are remembered no more.

Thus, under the teaching of the Apostle, the conscience is taught to deal with God, and the sinner exhorted to be happy in His love, and satisfied with His provisions — thus to enter the kingdom as a little child, not *reasoning* but *receiving*.

In John, we see living cases in which the Lord was dealing with the conscience; in Hebrews, we are taught in what way the conscience is to deal with the Lord, and how it is to reach the condition in which the conscience of Andrew, Nathanael, the Samaritan, the Adulteress, and the Beggar, were left by Jesus.

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WE may walk so as to have ourselves in the presence of, or in company with, the Lord.

We may act so as to bring our fellow-saints or fellow-sinners into His presence or into His company.

We may be living so as to be keeping ourselves before our fellows or companions.

The first is the way of a worshipper.

The second is the activity of a true servant.

The third is the fruit of vanity and want of singleheartedness, and will surely keep us uncertain, without joy and strength, and prove a snare as well as bitterness in the latter end.

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MAY we have Himself, not His truth merely! For there *is* a *difference*, and there *may be* a distance between these, as experience tells us. May we reach *Himself*, through reading, or ministry, or prayer, or communion! We need more *affection* and *attention*, that we may have Him *personally*.