

Living with a good conscience !!

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- [0 : 00] I'm going to sing Psalm 130 to God's praise. Psalm 130.
- I will sing the whole psalm. Lord, from the depths to thee I cried, My voice, Lord, do thou hear, And to my supplications' voice give an attentive ear.
- Lord, who shall stand if thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquity? But yet with thee forgiveness is that feared thou mayest be. I wait for God, my soul doth wait.
- My hope is in his word, more than they that for morning watch. My soul waits for the Lord. I say, more than they that do watch the morning light to see.
- Let Israel hope in the Lord, for with him mercy speak. And plenteous redemption is ever found with him. And from all his iniquities the Israel shall redeem.
- [1 : 05] The whole of Psalm 130 to God's praise. Lord, from the depths to thee I cried. Lord, from the depths to thee I cried, My voice, Lord, do thou hear, Unto my supplications' voice give an attentive ear.
- Lord, who shall stand if thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquity?
- But yet with thee forgiveness is that fear thou mayest be.
- I wait for God, my soul doth wait.
- My hope is in his word. More than they that for morning watch.
- [2 : 56] My soul is heart of the Lord. I say, more than they that do watch.
- So morning light to see. Let Israel open the Lord.
- For with him mercy speak. And plenty of redemption is ever found with him.
- And from all his iniquities he Israel shall redeem.
- Can we turn back now to the chapter that we read in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 23.
- [4 : 33] And we can read again at the beginning of the chapter. And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.
- And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth. Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall, for soiddest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest thou to be smitten contrary to the law.
- And so on. Particularly these words we have in verse 1. I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.
- I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. This passage of scripture reminds us of the spirit that prevailed in the world against God's people.
- which in this portion finds expression in the enmity that was in the heart of the Jewish leadership against Paul the Apostle.
- [6 : 09] The account we are given begins in the previous chapter. And Paul is telling his experience of coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

And as he so does, the declaration is made concerning him that they would wish him dead.

And that is their ultimate desire. More than a passing similarity to the way the Lord was brought before the Sanhedrin in order for him to be found guilty.

But they've already decided on the fate of the Apostle. And we find that that lies behind what we have in this chapter.

That God intervenes and God reveals to the Apostle that he has a ministry for him. That he has a ministry for him that will be extended beyond the borders of where Paul envisaged he would be preaching the gospel.

[7 : 41] He receives word in chapter 23 that God intends for him to preach the gospel in Rome. But the superintendents, the way God overrules in the providence of his people, even allowing the hands of wicked men to seemingly work their own evil.

And yet that is what allows Paul to have access to the Roman authorities. And you know the story, I'm sure, of how Paul disclosed the fact that he was going to be scourged, he was going to be tortured by the Roman soldiers.

They bound him with thongs and they were going to scourge him. And Paul challenges them and says, Do you not know that this person that you had binding is a Roman?

And that brought to an end that moment in his life where he was exposed to the threat on his life.

But he was taken from there and we see how that works out. But my focus with you tonight is on the role that Paul identifies as belonging to the conscience.

[9 : 36] He says, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. It invites a question. Would anybody else say such a thing?

Then maybe you would be able to agree with that statement. Whether to any one of the apostles other than Paul, you might be able to say that their life was free from anything that would condemn them by way of their conscience.

But bearing in mind the history of the apostle, the background of the apostle, is it legitimate for him to say that his conscience is void of offense before God until this day?

It's as if he is saying, there's nothing in my character, there's nothing in my life that my conscience condemns me for.

Now I suppose an easy answer would be for us to say these words simply apply to the allegations that are made against him.

[11 : 00] these charges that are to be levied against him, that he is an enemy of God, that he is a heretic, which is essentially what they want to charge him with, that he has departed from the law of God and the truth of God.

And he preaches against it. So therefore, he deserves a heretic's death. Is it right then when we think of Paul's conscience being devoid of offense to God?

How would we explain that? How would we how would we understand it? What do we understand by what do we understand by the way the conscience works in the life of any one of us?

We often hear said, and we probably said it to others, that they are without conscience. And when we say that, what we mean is that their actions clearly are unregulated.

That their behavior is a behavior that is offensive in some way. That it is illegal in some way. For just to give a general example, if we were to think of Putin in his behavior towards Ukraine, we would say, this man has no conscience.

[12 : 50] He doesn't mind what he is doing. He doesn't care what he is doing. It's not just war against soldiers. It is war against innocent civilians, young and old.

So he's without conscience. He doesn't worry about the implications of his actions. But what do we mean when we think about the conscience and its function?

We know that Paul, the apostle, was once Saul, the persecutor of the Church of Christ. We know that he lived his life with the intention of bringing as many as possible of those who were Christian either into prison or even to death.

We know that he was eyewitness to the death of Stephen, perhaps even more than eyewitness to it. He was certainly present at his death.

We know that he does not deny his involvement in the persecution of believing people.

[14 : 09] And yet his explanation for it is that he did it without him. He did it in ignorance.

He did it without knowing that what he was doing was wrong. Now is that a sufficient excuse for anyone if their wrongdoing is contrary to the word of God?

Is it simply something that we can excuse and that our conscience is nullified if we live with this thought behind our actions?

well, we don't know the full extent of the implications of what we're doing. We're innocent in that sense. Whatever we do, if we're not fully cognizant of the rights and wrongs of it or the conclusions of it, that we retain our innocence.

Is the conscience at that moment in abeyance? is it nullified? Does it not work at all?

[15 : 33] And in one strong sense we have to understand that whatever the conscience does, however it functions, it must function with the knowledge behind it or integral to it, that what is either condemned or commended, that God's word condemns or commends it.

We can extend the realms of conscience beyond the function of God's word, but the conscience is not really at that point functioning as the conscience should function.

In order for the conscience to operate as God intends it to operate, at the heart of its operation is God's word.

What God's word says to us, and if we do what God's word says, then the conscience functions by way of commendation.

If we don't do what God's word says, then the conscience condemns us. And I think we can all understand how that operates at a personal level.

[17 : 13] That the conscience, when it is whole, when it is healthy, when we do wrong, the conscience functions in bringing the wrongdoing to our attention.

Coming back to Paul, if Paul had remained as he was, as all the sinner who was intent on the destruction of the church, the conscience would only have applied to him when God's word confronted him at the point of his actions, enlightening him on the wrongdoing that was contained within these actions.

God met with Paul and revealed to him who he was, who Christ was, and from the information that was given to him, from the enlightening role of the Holy Spirit in his experience, he was brought to understand that what he was doing was wrong.

the conscience at that point would begin to function. It would condemn him if he continued to do what he intended to do.

If he continued to persecute the church after the light of God's word in the hand of the Holy Spirit condemning his actions then it would have condemned him still further.

[19 : 11] His experiences, his condition would have been an unhappy one, an uncomfortable one, and one which would be difficult to bear.

But when the Holy Spirit applied to Paul the finished work of Christ Jesus Jesus, when he experienced the quickening of the Spirit, when he was regenerated, when he was born again, when his eyes were opened, and when he understood the fullness of the power of the gospel, and he believed in what Christ did for himself, and he turned from his sin, and he embraced by faith Jesus Christ, then the conscience no longer accused him, the conscience no longer brought him into condemnation, but brought him into the place where he was able to appreciate the effective power of the death of Christ on the cross.

We're just talking about the experience of Paul just now, because he, at this moment in time, was able to stand in the presence of those who accused him, and he was able to speak to them in light of his own experience, an experience that took in what he was prior to his coming to faith, and his experience subsequent to that.

all hinging upon the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. I don't know if I'm managing to explain this properly, but I want to look at it from the point of view of Paul for that one moment, so that when we think about the role of conscience in our own experience, we understand how it applies to us, how it functions with regard to ourselves, what role it has, and what the outcomes that we will encounter will be.

so what then can we say about the conscience on the basis of what the scripture is telling us?

[22 : 14] First of all, for ourselves we must understand, just as surely as it must have been true for the apostle, that it is God's word that is essential for the conscience to function as it should.

The conscience functions in the light of God's word and what it says. We are bound by our conscience as long as it is informed by the word.

As long as it is God's word that is the means by which is right or wrong or determined. If you go to the Westminster Confession of Faith and it doesn't really treat the topic of the conscience other than with regard to liberty of conscience.

And when it treats it in that sense it is telling you that you are not bound by another person's conscience. You are not bound by another person's creed for living.

You are not bound by somebody else's rules and regulations other than where their life and their conduct and their behavior is governed by God's word.

[23 : 51] And therein is the determining factor with regard to our Christian experience. God directs us through the word as to how to live our lives and conduct ourselves as believing people.

He has given us his word and as that word is either believed or ignored by us the conscience is always effective.

If we believe the word if we act upon it in faith if we are diligent in following the path of obedience with regard to the word the word and the spirit using the conscience however you describe its function it's not really something that's very easily understood how the conscience actually what lies at the heart of the conscience is activity we know that it is the Holy Spirit that is operational we know that it is the word that is in his hand when it is operational it acts upon the mind it informs and it illumines it directs it's part and partial of our human psyche can we say that the person who is without

God is without conscience if it is something that functions preeminently in the experience of the believer and I don't think you can because if you go to the words of Paul to the Romans for example Romans 2 he says for as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law for not the hearers of the law are just before God but the doers of the law shall be justified for when the Gentiles which have not the law do by nature the things contained in the law these having not the law alone to themselves which show the work of the law written in their hearts their conscience also bearing witness and their thoughts the meanwhile speaking about unbelievers those who do not have

God's word as the rule of their life their conscience functions to condemn them even though they may not heed what the conscience is saying to them if the word has accessed their heart at any point in any meaningful way or even just in passing their conscience is burdened by that word and their actions will either condemn them or excuse them now for the believer the reality is that our conscience can function but it is not the preeminent rule of life the rule for your life is God's word not the conscience you may think it's one and the same but it isn't the conscience functions using the word of

[27 : 50] God but it is the word of God that is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him God's word the reason why it is not the conscience is that the Bible tells us that the conscience can be weakened that the conscience can be corrupted that the conscience can be cauterized as with a hot idol we can affect the function of the conscience even though it is still to a degree in operation its operation is it is not the way it should be it is not functioning the way it should do so that if a person falls prey to a particular sin just for example any sin it doesn't matter what the sin is that sin will be encountered by the discomfort a fully functioning conscience will bring your way

God's word will stimulate the conscience to condemn you and the condemnation will make you uncomfortable it will make you miserable it will make you feel the burden that sin ought to make you feel and the end of that is to take you away from sin take you from your sin to Christ where you have repented of the sin and where you have sought his grace to forsake it sin but if you persist in that sin whatever that sin may be if you persist the way the conscience operates will be affected you will find that your sin will take a deeper root if you like and the conscience in its power and potence will be less and that is something that you are responsible for as a believer who understands how the conscience works we can and we do find ourselves in situations where we are guilty in that respect

I think Paul on various occasions finds it necessary to remind the church of the way that there are those who have who once embraced the truth have gone away from the truth because they took these steps away from the truth not in one fell swoop but gradually Paul's epistle to I can't get to the very verse there but he's also in 1st Timothy chapter 1 if we come back to Paul again it is the role of the devil to bring the

Lord's people into sin that is his primary desire to ruin the relationship between God and his people to sully their witness to deprive them of the strength that they have to live as believers in the world and the one thing that he does with regard to the conscience is to direct you to the sin that was in your heart that you once committed for which you have received forgiveness that you have repented of that you have been forgiven for the devil will direct you back to these sins and tell you that the the what you believe to have happened has not now that's he's as if it were poking stirring warning you as he could the apostle go to the apostle he will remind him this is what you wear

Saul this is how you behave this is what you did and the only answer to that is to go to Christ the only remedy for it to to solve the conscience that Satan has stirred not you have to discern between what God has given to you for your protection and for your nurture and for your encouragement to something that the devil uses in order to weaken your testimony he might appear the same to us but you must remind yourself as a believer as Paul believed that God was the savior of sinners even though he was the chief of sinners that the forgiveness of which we sang in Psalm 130 was of such a nature that no matter the sin that

[34 : 38] God was equal to it and there your conscience should be an encouragement to you rather than accusing you the way the devil uses it it is to weaken and to accuse we need to understand that God has given the conscience to the believer as something that is precious and should be protected and should be preserved and should be recognized when it is reminding us you know if our conscience is guarding us if our conscience is telling us well that's not right that's not something you should have done something you should listen to you shouldn't depend on it but you should listen to it what you should depend on is the word that lies behind it it's interesting for me anyway looking at this encounter that

Paul has with the Sanhedrin with the Jewish leaders he deals with them and they are in effect accusing him as if he says my conscience is clear but they are accusing him the high priest and Ananias commanded them to smite him on the mouth it is more or less a mirror image of how the conscience works smiting Paul because the high priest is alleging that he is guilty of sin but Paul's response to him you'll notice he accuses him of being no better than a white sepulcher the hypocrisy that is evident in the person who is without conscience being a conscience to the person who is governed by it under

God's hand there you have it in this confrontation it's a very interesting confrontation how some people accuse Paul of lacking restraint and saying he should have turned the other cheek and he shouldn't have cursed this man he wasn't God's anointed which is what he should have been and Paul respected the office even though he did not respect the officer he respected what the man stood for although he knew that the man was behaving not according to the office that he stood that he represented

God in revilest thou God's high priest and so on but really the thing that I want us to understand is this that it is so I think there's a picture for us here how powerful the grace of God is so that even where we are liable to accuse ourselves in concert with the enemy of our soul for the sins of our past even the sins of our present the remedy for that lies at our disposal and that is to repent of our sin to embrace Jesus Christ as he is presented to us in the gospel receive his forgiveness accept his mercy and have our sins put where

God has promised to put them I remember an old elder in Stornoway and he had such a fragile conscience and there are people whose conscience is so fragile and he told us remember as a young Christian hearing him and concluding from his own words that I was nothing like him and I probably wasn't but he became a Christian as a young boy and he used to the other boys would be playing football and he would be sitting on the school wall watching him play and one day the ball was kicked into his direction and he put out his foot and he kicked the ball back and his conscience burdened him terribly because he felt he had betrayed the

[40 : 39] Lord in that action now you might think that's so extreme but you're not allowed to condemn his conscience you're not allowed to judge his conscience because it is his he might have it is a conscience that's informed but maybe it is overly zealous it would be interesting how he was at the end of his day with regard to if such a thing ever came his way again but we can't judge him on the basis of how his conscience works in that way but he couldn't allow his conscience to be your judge even if you were one of the boys who was playing football and you were maybe professing the name of Christ we need to be very careful how we nurture what God has given to us to keep us in the way and to keep close to himself and to shun evil because whatever evil is whatever it is however extreme it is it never ends in anything that is good for us and may

God give these thoughts a place in our hearts let us pray oh Lord oh God we pray that you would remember us when our conscience is stimulated by your own spirit directing us to the word teaching us what is right and what is wrong and what is fruitful and what is not may we be sensitive to the leadings and the promptings of your spirit we pray that you would remember your people in all the different situations in which they find themselves that each and every one of them would be guarded kept and protected in the path of obedience forgive sin in Jesus name amen going to conclude our service singing from psalm 11 in gaelic psalm 11 in adfas vers 5 rawsich i gia na ffira nich ach lwch na haingio gos fwyl anem ysgach niach yg sbeth do raganoc y dyny drach fwynd dors di gia nhoas riboch yn gyn g ys tjene prones stonion garaf coedan yng hwyrb do ni o ddi a hwyrb o'ch ysgach dy synyf yn les ychor yw gafodd gyrch na ffira ni le jeg nho slon dog lodd a yw di yw

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[46 : 56] Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.