

Conscience: The Role It Plays Brought Out In The Bible

Before moving on to other matters related to the subject of conscience, which is what I said I would do tonight I thought we might briefly go back over the major points made in the talk last week and go on from there.

One of the most important things said, was that conscience is formed from the truths and concepts instilled into the mind and received as true, and that far from being an infallible dictate, as it is sometimes supposed to be, it will necessarily carry the limitations of the degree of understanding and enlightenment we have reached. Conscience, it must be stressed, can only speak to us through the truths we have received, however imperfectly presented these have been, or however imperfectly understood by us they are.

Two things follow on from this. In the first place, not only is conscience acquired, but it grows and develops. "A more perfect conscience" writes Swedenborg, "is possible with those who are more enlightened than others in the truths of faith, and who excel others in clear perception, than with those who are less enlightened, and are in obscure perception." (*Heavenly Doctrine* 132). The second thing is that conscience varies with different people. What one person, from conscience, is unable to do, another person may feel no qualms about doing it at all. It depends on what has been taught, what has been received, what material was supplied from which conscience was formed.

Another thing which was mentioned last week is that everyone has conscience, though of course, in adulthood, and by deliberately choosing to do so, a person can silence conscience even to the point that they seem no longer to have one. Nevertheless this is not the fault of the Lord. He sees to it that in every situation every person, whether Christian or non-Christian, believer or nonbeliever, church goer or non Church goer, has conscience. The point is that without conscience there would be no brake, as there so obviously needs to be on our inclinations to hurt, to take revenge, to get our own way, to live our lives in an utterly selfish way. There would be no way for the Lord, through the agency of the angelic associates with us, to hold us back from these things and to turn the directions of our lives elsewhere.

This, again, brings home to us the way in which conscience cannot but vary with different people, in different parts of the world, from different backgrounds, of different religions. Whatever is learned and received as true, as we now know, forms conscience. In some countries what people learn and receive as true has to do with diet and fasting and such things. From conscience they may not be able to eat certain foods. But the way in which conscience varies with people isn't the important thing. The important thing is that everyone strives to live according to the dictates of their conscience. By so doing they come to resist the wilful and self-regarding inclinations which are inherent in human nature. Part and parcel of such effort to obey conscience is a humility and willingness to be led by God (however He is regarded) and this, in turn, is the very stuff from which heaven and the heavenly life is formed. We'll return to this point near the end of the talk and, in the meantime, let's just note this, from Swedenborg's "*Heavenly Secrets*", paragraph 2115, "Non Christians are saved if they have received anything of conscience according to their religion".

This is what matters. That a person, whatever the background or religion, has received and lived according to conscience. One final reminder of the points covered last week must be a reference to the relatively exterior conscience of childhood and youth as against the conscience of adulthood, received and strengthened and built up

with us from the truths and concepts we have received in our hearts and have struggled to hold on to in the face of temptations to abandon them. On the one hand we have a conscience "formed from the knowledge of good and truth derived from parents and masters, and from things learned from the Bible" ([Arcana Caelestia 2831](#)). On the other hand we have a conscience formed from what has been heard, acknowledged, rationally thought about and obeyed, obeyed that is, because a person sees, himself, that a thing is true and not because others have told him. Conscience, therefore, is twofold, of different degree and intensity.

Conscience, being as important as it is, you would expect it to figure prominently in the Bible and it does. In fact it is a theme which runs through a very large part of the Bible. And though this is not immediately apparent on the surface it is when we begin to get beneath the surface and come to terms with the underlying spiritual meaning which is there. It seems a useful approach to take a very broad view of what is involved, at least first of all.

Our starting point in this regard is a realisation that the Bible is the Lord's way of reaching us in the different states and situations in which we find ourselves in this world; that though on the surface it treats of worldly things and events of long ago, yet within it treats of spiritual things and of the way in which we develop, spiritually, and the church is established in our hearts and minds.

At the beginning things are described as being relatively calm and the people as essentially innocent. And so it is with us in the beginning. But as things went on and the Israelites became more sophisticated and were more exposed to the evils around them, it was, as we know, necessary for the Lord to raise up prophets to remind the people of loyalties and standards of conduct which they were in danger of abandoning or had already done so. They, in fact, became the conscience of the nation. Nathan was David's conscience. Elijah was Ahab's conscience. Isaiah was Hezekiah's conscience. And this is what these men, these prophets, represent in us - conscience. We also have the same inclinations and tendencies to corruption and idolatry as the people of Israel had. Remember here, the Bible is not so much a history of what has gone on in the past, but a mirror of ourselves. And the Lord uses conscience with us, just as He used the prophets of old, to warn us, chide us, threaten us and guide us. What we have got to do is to put ourselves in the place of the people of Israel. We share their backsliding habits, their worldliness, and pleasure seeking ways. It is you and I who are involved. And the prophets, from Samuel onwards, speak to us of the need for, and the reality of, conscience in our lives

The prophets were never really popular men and, in the same way, conscience is never really popular with us. Respected and even loved in a way as Samuel was, he at the same time, never really hit it off with the people who were restless under his leadership towards the end and not willing to go along with his advice. However as things developed and the people became even more rebellious, life for the prophets became correspondingly more difficult. Mention was made a moment ago of Elijah whom Ahab and Jezebel resolved to murder. We remember also the treatment meted out to Jeremiah and the way in which Amos was received. Sadly the people became far more daring and less concerned. It came to the point when for many it didn't matter what the prophets said to them.

As with the prophets (and here again is another point which should not be lost on us) conscience can ask of us what seems to be ruthless and hard things. It has long puzzled people, for example, that Samuel could command king Saul to destroy the Amalekites, "all that they have" he said, "slay both man and woman, infant and

suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass." (1 *Samuel* 15,3). But the puzzle is resolved when we realise that Samuel is the voice of conscience within us, commanding no compromise or soft heartedness when it comes to the evil things in our lives. That's one of our problems, isn't it? That we vacillate, like Saul did. Like him we are unwilling to go the whole way. We still want to hold on to something of the selfish pleasure we have had from, say, ordering people around, or always getting our own way.

We see conscience illustrated and at work in the well known Bible story of Naaman the leper. Naaman, we recall, at last decided to consult Elisha the prophet as one who might well suggest a cure for his disease. Conscience has a cure for our spiritual diseases and in fact is well able to indicate the way health can be restored. This is what it is there for. But, like Naaman, we are so easily fooled by the simplicity of the instructions which conscience has for us. Conscience has a plain and simple message for us, not dramatic gestures or acts of heroism and self sacrifice; but the washing and cleansing of our thought and actions in the waters of everlasting life.

Earlier in the talk we saw how it is that conscience is the key where salvation is concerned and this departure from traditional thinking won't, I'm sure, have been lost on you. We need to remind ourselves that the Lord created all people, not just Christians and that He loves all people, again not just Christians. It's not a set of beliefs which are the key to salvation. The important thing is that we sincerely try to live according to the dictates of the conscience which has been formed with us, whatever the religious background or context within which it was formed.

"There is a general opinion that those born outside the Church, who are called heathen, or gentiles, cannot be saved, because not having the Word they know nothing about the Lord, and apart from the Lord there is no salvation. But that these also are saved can be known from this alone, that the mercy of the Lord is universal, that is, towards every individual; that these are born men equally with those within the Church, who are few in comparison, and that it is not their fault that they do not know the Lord." (*Heaven and Hell* 318).

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