

BEYOND TODAY

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A matter of conscience

An individual's internal moral compass is considered a voice of reason, or at least a prod to do the right thing. How can it be trained to become a force for good rather than merely troubling a mind?

Conscience is a person's moral view on life and provides guiding principles to one's behaviour. Morality is the belief that some behaviours are right and acceptable and that others are wrong. In other words, what we perceive to be right or wrong comes from our conscience which then governs our behaviour.

Such perceptions are acquired from education, experience and culture. These, plus our human reasoning, help us to develop a conscience, either good or bad.

Needed – God's guidance

Since knowledge is the guide to our conscience, how should we as Christians seek to harmonise our thoughts with God's? The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans points us in the right direction: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:1-2). Paul is stating that unless we continually strive to take on the essential mind of God, our natural instincts will overcome us, because our natural way of thinking does not coincide with the way He thinks.

God elaborates on this subject through the prophet Isaiah: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are

your ways My ways,' says the Lord. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8-9). Here God is again stressing that we don't view matters as He does.

Additionally, we have a tendency to deceive ourselves into believing we are better behaved than we really are: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

By continually contravening what we know in our heart to be right, or by failing to check with God's word that our thoughts are in alignment with His, a conscience can become defiled and not prompt us to take the cor-

If we contravene what we know in our heart to be right, a conscience can become defiled and not prompt us to take the correct course.

rect course of action (Titus 1:15). If this continues for too long, it is even possible to "sear our consciences," just as meat is seared in a pan. A conscience can become calloused, scarred and unfeeling, so it no longer has any beneficial influence on our minds (1 Timothy 4:1-2).

Scripture leaves us in no doubt what to do.

Source of right thinking

The apostle Paul had something to say on the matter of conscience when he was brought before Felix the governor to defend himself against false accusations levelled against him in Jerusalem. “This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence toward God and men” (Acts 24:16).

Paul, when facing this governor was declaring that he reflected the Ten Commandments by striving to show love towards God and men. This is only way revealed in Scripture that shows love giving no offence and that emanates from obedience to God’s law.

How do we develop such a Christian conscience? In essence it is the way to acquire the very mind of God. It can only be formed by keeping those commandments. As the Almighty promises, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord; I will put

it: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17-18). This implies the completion of the plan of God in bringing the opportunity for salvation to all of mankind.

Jesus continually instructed His disciples to keep the commandments. He promised assistance to enable them to follow this way of outgoing concern instead of display-

We have a tendency to deceive ourselves into believing we are better behaved than we really are.

ing mankind’s inherited, natural, carnal nature. He would ask His Father to supply His Holy Spirit, His very essence, as a helper (John 14:15-16).

The apostle Paul also stressed commandment-keeping in his epistles. Whilst instructing a young minister, Timothy, concerning the true purpose of the law which still applies for us today, Paul advised: “Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1: 5). The commandments train our conscience to practise love. The first four commandments explain how to show love towards God and the last six how to show love towards our fellow man.

Many civilisations around the world, including those in the Western World possess a conscience that has been developed apart from the laws of God. Instead it is drawn from their own knowledge and cultural ideals. A Christian conscience should not be based on human feelings, ideas or opinions but on the very words of God. Western culture once based many of its laws upon biblical teachings, but increasingly today man is departing further and further away from God’s revealed way of life.

The Bible must be our main source of education, so we experience the way that we are supposed to live and thus develop a culture in which a godly conscience can mature. The acquisition of more knowledge of the truth of God is a continuous process designed to hone our conscience, bringing it ever closer to the revealed will of our Creator.

To study this important topic further please request or download our booklet *Transforming Your Life*.

David Payne



God wrote the Ten Commandments on tables of stone, but He wants them written in our hearts and minds.

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my laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them” (Hebrews 10:16).

On account of this promise, the apostle Paul encourages us: “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:22).

Commandments reflect the mind of God

To help us become living embodiments of God’s commandments, we are admonished throughout the Bible to keep them. Jesus preached in the book of Matthew that the law still stands and that He hadn’t come to annul

A handful of earth

Man-made customs and traditions often have little or nothing to do with Scripture and may be traced to non-Christian sources. Sometimes, however, a seemingly strange practice – in this case involving soil – may link to a genuine biblical teaching.

In relatively recent times, when Jewish travellers to the Holy Land finished their trip, many of them scooped up a handful of earth from the Mount of Olives and took it home with them. Unable to be interred at the cemeteries on the Mount, the intention was to deposit the soil either in their own graves when they were buried, or to spread it on the graves of already deceased loved ones in their country of residence. To them it was a token, a reminder that God would again be present in Jerusalem at the time of the end. It would also be the time of the resurrection of the dead.

Descended from one of the twelve tribes of Israel, Jewish visitors desired to connect with the history of their forefathers some thousands of years ago. God commanded the patriarch Abraham to leave Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and head to what became known as the Promised Land,ⁱ or the Holy Land, which the Almighty pledged to him and his descendants through his son Isaac. Christians also identify with Abraham as the father of the faithful (Galatians 3:9). Thus, to both religions, that land became holy.

God was present among the Israelites under Moses (Exodus 16:10 and 24:16). That divine Presence never ceased during the time the children of Israel were in the wilderness.

Then there were the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone “with the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18) and placed in an ark which was kept in the moveable tabernacle. King David provided the materials for building the Temple in Jerusalem late in his life. Built during the reign of his son Solomon, the most holy part of the temple later housed the ark of the covenant which still contained these tablets. Other laws of God were placed outside the ark but still in this holiest area of the temple. This highlighted their importance.

A pivotal prophecy

However, there is more to taking home a handful of soil than the Holy Land’s divine associations. There is a specific prophecy of a future event – a belief held by both Jews and Christians – and “a handful of earth” fits into this prophecy.

Found in Zechariah are the words of the Almighty

concerning the end of man’s rule on earth: “I shall gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem . . . Then the LORD will fight against those nations . . . and in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives which faces Jerusalem on the east . . . *Thus the LORD our God will come and all the saints with [Him]* . . . and the LORD shall be king over all the earth” (Zechariah 14:3-9). We know



A Jewish cemetery on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem.

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from the book of Revelation that the member of the God Family who fights this battle is Jesus Christ (Revelation 19:11-16).

To bring the saints with Him, will require that God resurrect them. Many have assumed that those buried on the Mount of Olives, or in its soil, would be the first to rise. Resurrection is spoken of in both the Old and New Testaments. Daniel 12:1-2 is a clear summation of living again. Of the end time the prophet wrote that “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

The Mount of Olives is a short distance from where the Temple stood. Here, this stupendous event will occur at a most critical time in human history and God’s presence will again be felt there in the not-too-distant future. That is a firm belief amongst both the Jewish and Christian religious communities.

This prophecy of God returning to the Mount of Olives was confirmed by the angels who appeared to the disciples immediately after Christ's ascension to heaven: "Now when He [Jesus] had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven'" (Acts 1:9-11). This event took place on the Mount of Olives (verse 12).

Resurrection of the righteous foretold

The apostle Paul declared: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-16).

Jesus prophesied that: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven,

and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and *they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other*" (Matthew 24:29-31).

At Christ's return, dead saints will be resurrected and Christians who are alive will also be changed into spirit beings. His angels will gather them to Him so it doesn't matter where the resurrected saints may be buried. Why then are the Jews so interested in the Mount of Olives? This is where the decisive battle between the forces of good and evil will culminate. That has yet to occur. Apart from Jesus Christ, no one has been resurrected from the dead and given everlasting life (Hebrews 11:39-40). It's still a promise, but a promise from God is as good as if it had already become reality. Since they rejected Christ as their Messiah, the Jews are, as yet, unaware that it will occur at the time of Christ's return to the Mount of Olives.

Nonetheless, that handful of earth was to them symbolic of being resurrected at some future point in time. This event will benefit not only the descendants of Abraham but the whole of mankind.

Gerhard Marx

A fitting analogy in nature

As we approach the Passover season – the annual memorial of Christ's atoning sacrifice – we begin to see new life sprouting in the soil after having been dormant during winter. This appearance of new life is used to make two different analogies in Scripture.

Firstly, God's elect, those called to salvation in this age of man, are required to "put to death the deeds of the body" (Romans 8:13). The "deeds" to which the apostle Paul is referring include "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5).

In this way what Paul calls the "old man" must die and a new life of growing to be like Christ begins: "That you put off concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24). Jesus himself said, "most assuredly, I say to

you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain" (John 12:24).

Secondly, those who have been faithful to God's calling – in both Old and New Testament times – and are now dead, are presently "asleep." Just like a dormant seed, they are awaiting the resurrection of the just. Paul explains this analogy further in 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, "But someone will say, 'How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?' Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies. And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain – perhaps wheat or some other grain. But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body."

Paul goes to some length in explaining that the prospect of living again is by means of a resurrection from the dead. That is what the Bible teaches rather than a person "going to heaven" when he or she dies. Our booklet, *What Happens After Death?* Explains this topic in more detail.

Restoring what was shattered

The relationship between God and mankind has been marred by brokenness. Reconciliation is a process that repairs what is broken and implies something greater than a mere cessation of hostilities.

Human beings first entertained animosity towards the Creator 6,000 years ago in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve could have lived happy and fulfilled lives, but instead, influenced by Satan the devil, chose to determine right and wrong for themselves, and disobeyed God's instructions.

Due to this rebellion and disobedience God has allowed nations and individuals to select their own way of life. As a result society has largely chosen to live contrary to His ways and suffers the consequences. There is no shortage of ills plaguing societies: disease, drug abuse, violence, greed, immorality, promiscuity, divorce, and the like (2 Timothy 3:2-5).

God still offers a choice to choose Him and follow His laws that lead to blessings and life, but the vast majority have rejected and rebelled against Him leading to curses and death.

Restoration promised

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines reconciliation as "the act of causing two people or groups to become friendly again after an argument or disagreement."

The good news, or gospel of the Kingdom of God is that reconciliation to God has not only been promised but He has already performed His part in this process: "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to

Those who have been healed serve as a model and inspiration for others. In this way we display the preciousness of Jesus Christ's sacrifice.

them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

This is beautifully illustrated by the Japanese concept of *kintsugi*, translated as "golden joinery" or "golden repair." It combines philosophy and art to repair broken

pottery by mending the areas of breakage with lacquer dusted or mixed with precious metals, such as powdered



gold, silver, or platinum. The result is striking – instead of hiding the history of breakage and repair, the fractures are accentuated.

The repaired cup, bowl, or other vessel, is a reminder that we can become more beautiful when our brokenness is healed. We are the sum of our experiences, especially the bad ones from which we are more likely to learn life lessons. Furthermore, those who have been healed serve as a model and inspiration for others who have had the same experiences. In this way we display the preciousness of Jesus Christ's sacrifice. As the apostle Peter stated: "... knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

What if I don't believe in God?

You're not alone. Most people who have ever lived have not had a relationship with the true God. Many people have lived and died without even knowing who Jesus was or why He died. Even those who profess to know Jesus follow popular views of Christianity, thus worshipping a false God because they do not keep His statutes and

laws. (To study this topic further please request or download our booklet *The Ten Commandments*.)

Everyone will stand before God's throne and be judged. However, God is not unfair. Judgement will not be passed until all have been given an opportunity to learn God's way and decide if they wish to obey. Critics often



The golden repair is not hidden but becomes part of the history of the bowl. In the same way God's forgiveness through Christ becomes a part of our lives which we reflect as we become ever more reconciled to Them.

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portray the God of the Old Testament as cruel, however He always provided an opportunity to repent. Here is a biblical truth most of the world does not understand – God is not judging each person in this lifetime to eternal life or death. His desire is that all will come to know Him and want to be in the Kingdom (John 3:16-17; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). Judgement is currently only upon those whom God has called in this age (1 Peter 4:17). Others will be given their chance of salvation in a future resurrection (Revelation 20:5).

How is reconciliation possible?

Breaking God's law is sin (1 John 3:4). It is missing the mark; it is not living up to His standards. That sin separates us from Him. All have sinned against God and are therefore subject to the penalty of death (Romans 3:23, 6:23). However, God wants everyone to become part of His family as His literal begotten children. Consequently, a way has been made possible through the sacrificial death of His Son who paid the penalty for mankind's sin.

Currently, God is calling a little flock to do His work in this life (Luke 12:32). For the vast majority who have ever existed throughout history they will have a second chance of life but a first chance to understand God's way

of life. At that time they can decide if they want to obey God and follow His laws. In the end, God desires all to be reconciled to Him.

Restoring a relationship with God requires forgive-

Repentance is the daily choice to depart from evil and sin, and to follow God instead.

ness. Forgiveness doesn't mean nullifying the penalty, but that the death penalty is transferred to someone else. Thus, a blood sacrifice is required to absolve us from the consequence of our sin (1 Peter 1:18-20). In ancient Israel, the blood of animals was used as a stand-in for the perfect sacrifice that was offered by God's firstborn Son, Jesus Christ. Reconciliation is not possible on our own, but God extends mercy to us through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus (1 John 2:2, 4:9-10).

What is required of us?

We should understand that there is nothing we can do to earn forgiveness. This is not to say, however, that nothing is required of us. At the conclusion of Peter's sermon after the day of Pentecost in 31 AD, the book of Acts records a cry of anguish from the people: "... When they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37). They recognised they had to act. "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (verse 38).

Upon repentance and baptism, all the sins of our past are forgiven and forgotten. Our slate has been wiped clean. Now, our journey truly begins. Repentance is the daily choice to depart from evil and sin, and to follow God instead (Psalm 34:14).

As a child of God, not only do we co-operate with Him as He shapes us into vessels to receive His Holy Spirit and hold His literal power within us, but we allow Him to heal our brokenness and be restored to Him. In fact, the best possible outcome for a disciple of Christ is to seek His healing and become a repaired vessel through His mercy and grace. As we are healed and become reconciled to God, we can serve as a model of inspiration for others who are broken as we once were.

Mark Mirigian



Q I have heard reference to a second exodus. What is this?

FAQ

A The reference to a second exodus is found in Jeremiah 16:14-15, which compares the earlier Exodus from Egypt with a similar, still-future event. This latter gathering will occur soon after the return of Jesus Christ to the Mount of Olives mentioned in Zechariah 14:3 and Acts 1:9. At this time Christ will assemble together all the surviving descendants of Israel from all the places around the world wherever they happen to be. This includes members of all twelve tribes of Israel, not just the tribe of Judah (the Jews). These will be brought back to the land God promised to Abraham, their ancestor.

The prophet Ezekiel explains further: "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. And I will sanctify My great

name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD," says the Lord GOD, "when I am hallowed in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God" (Ezekiel 36:22-28). For further explanation see www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-commentary/bible-commentary-ezekiel-36.

Finally all the tribes of Israel will become the holy nation God initially intended and set an example of His perfect way of life to the rest of the world.

Q Do angels watch over us and do they sometimes appear to people?

FAQ

A In the Bible angels have two key roles. Firstly they are messengers between God and His human creation, as in Genesis 22:11 and Luke 1:5-20. Secondly, they work in God's service to accomplish His will.

Mentioned numerous times throughout the Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, angels are usually invisible to the human eye. Whilst they sometimes appeared in physical form, it was *only* in exceptional circumstances (see for example, 1 Kings 19:5-8; Acts 12:6-11).

Angels are much involved in the prophetic events to transpire at the end of man's allotted rule on earth. They shall also be instrumental in proclaiming God's final warning prior to Armageddon and the return of Christ (Revelation 14:6-7).

Since we now have the whole Bible, God's revelation, in our possession, there is really no need for angels to appear to anyone with prophetic messages. God reveals His will within the pages of Scripture. Yes, angels do exist, and may still interact with Christ's followers (Hebrews 13:2). We shouldn't expect them to appear before us visibly and should be wary of those who claim to have seen them. Certainly they should never be worshipped (Revelation 22:8-9).

To study this subject further please request or download *Angels: God's Messengers and Spirit Army*.

Let the Bible Answer...

What does the Bible say about preaching?

Proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom and salvation in Christ: Psalm 68:11; 96:1-3; Isaiah 61:1-7; Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 15:18-19; Philippians 1:12-18; 2 Timothy 4:2.

Preach repentance: Isaiah 58:1; Luke 24:46-47.

Setting a good example based on Scripture is also "preaching": Matthew 5:13-16; Philippians 1:27-30.

Just before Christ's return an angel shall preach the same message of turning to God: Revelation 14:6-7.



Letters From Our Readers

What our students say

Thank you for sending me the first four lessons. I do wish to renew, unfortunately [illness] means I haven't been able to focus on much.

Very relevant to me is Lesson 4, *Why Does God Allow Suffering?* I am going to try to read this one first.

Student in Wellingborough

This Bible course is really interesting, I'm very grateful for it. It is helping me to study the Bible seriously. I want to understand the prophecies of the end times.

Student in London

This Bible correspondence course is just what we need right now to keep us on track in this end time.

Student in Sutton Coldfield

Thank you for sending my results. I am really pleased I have passed. I am so glad I decided to delve into the word of God. Your teaching has opened my eyes.

Student in Wales

Thanks so much for helping me through this fantastic course.

Student in Gloucester

I really enjoyed this first study. It has given me motivation to study God's word more. It has increased my knowledge and understanding. I look forward to continuing.

Student in Wales

I am enjoying the studies very much. They are easy to understand and bring the Bible and people to life.

Student in Worksp

How to pray

Your booklets and course are very interesting and inspiring. I thank God for your help.

I haven't read anything in regard to praying, something I'm keen on.

Reader in Huntingdon

Editor's comment: Prayer is covered later in the Bible Study Course. In the interim we have sent you a copy of our booklet Tools for Spiritual Growth which contains a chapter on prayer which you may find helpful.

Continuous deception

Thank you very much for sending the booklet *Is There Really a Devil?* It was a surprise to me to begin to understand that the devil continually deceives the world.

Reader in London

All encompassing

I'm finding reading the Bible enjoyable, wondrous, scary and exciting. I've read half the Bible already but look forward to understanding God's words and being able to memorise them in my heart and mind.

I'm looking forward to being connected to God our Saviour.

Reader in London

Making time to study

I've been struggling with sticking to a routine, as sadly I am easily distracted. Your points to help with Bible study were what I needed.

I will try to make sure to put aside an hour each day to study [God's word].

Reader in London

How this work is supported

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