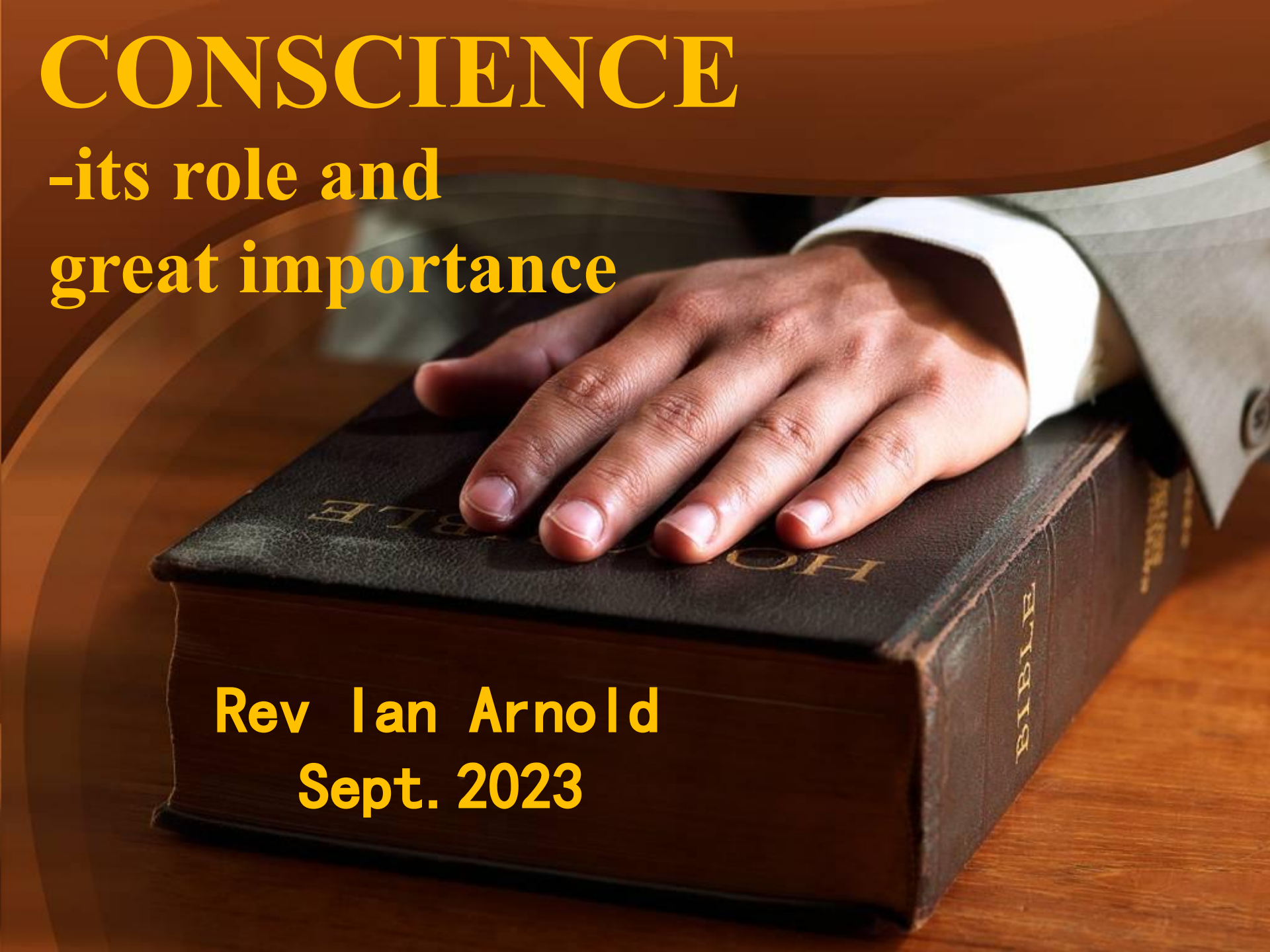
CONSCIENCE

-its role and great importance



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Sept. 2023

Samuel 3:21,4:1

"Then the LORD appeared again in Shiloh. For the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the Lord. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel."

Years ago, and when I was working as a Pastor in one of our churches in Sydney, Australia, there was a well qualified dietitian in my congregation who, one day, shared a dilemma she was facing at her work. This person worked in a very large public Hospital where there were several dietitians, as as many as ten. Her dilemma arose from the fact that whilst she always arrived on time to begin her work for the day, several of the other dietitians would arrived five, maybe ten, minutes late. Additionally, while she was very strict with herself to only take the allotted 40 minutes for her lunch break, some of her dietitian colleagues frequently took an hour, sometimes more, for their lunch break. Worse, and though said in a friendly way, the dietitians who arrived late for work or who had no qualms about taking a longer lunch break than they were authorized to, gently mocked her integrity and tried to persuade her to be as they were and to take the same liberties they took. But she refused to do so.

So, my question is, What was stopping her - this dietitian in my congregation, and who was obeying the rules – from doing the same as those other dieitians who broke the rules?

My memory of this person's dilemma, and the decision she made, not to do as some of her colleagues were doing, came back to me as an appropriate introduction to this sermon on **Conscience**.

We talk about Conscience; we are often troubled and challenged by it ; and we tend to demand even higher standards of others when it comes to acting according to Conscience. We also, especially when we are younger, wish we could wriggle free of the restraints it imposes on us. But for all this we know, when we stop and think about it, **how pivotal and necessary conscience is; and how unruly and chaotic life would be without it.**

The reality is that we rely on conscience, both other people's and our own, more than we realise. We rely on people's conscience to cause them to do the right thing. For example, to wait their turn in a queue or to be orderly and respectful of others about getting on and off public transport.

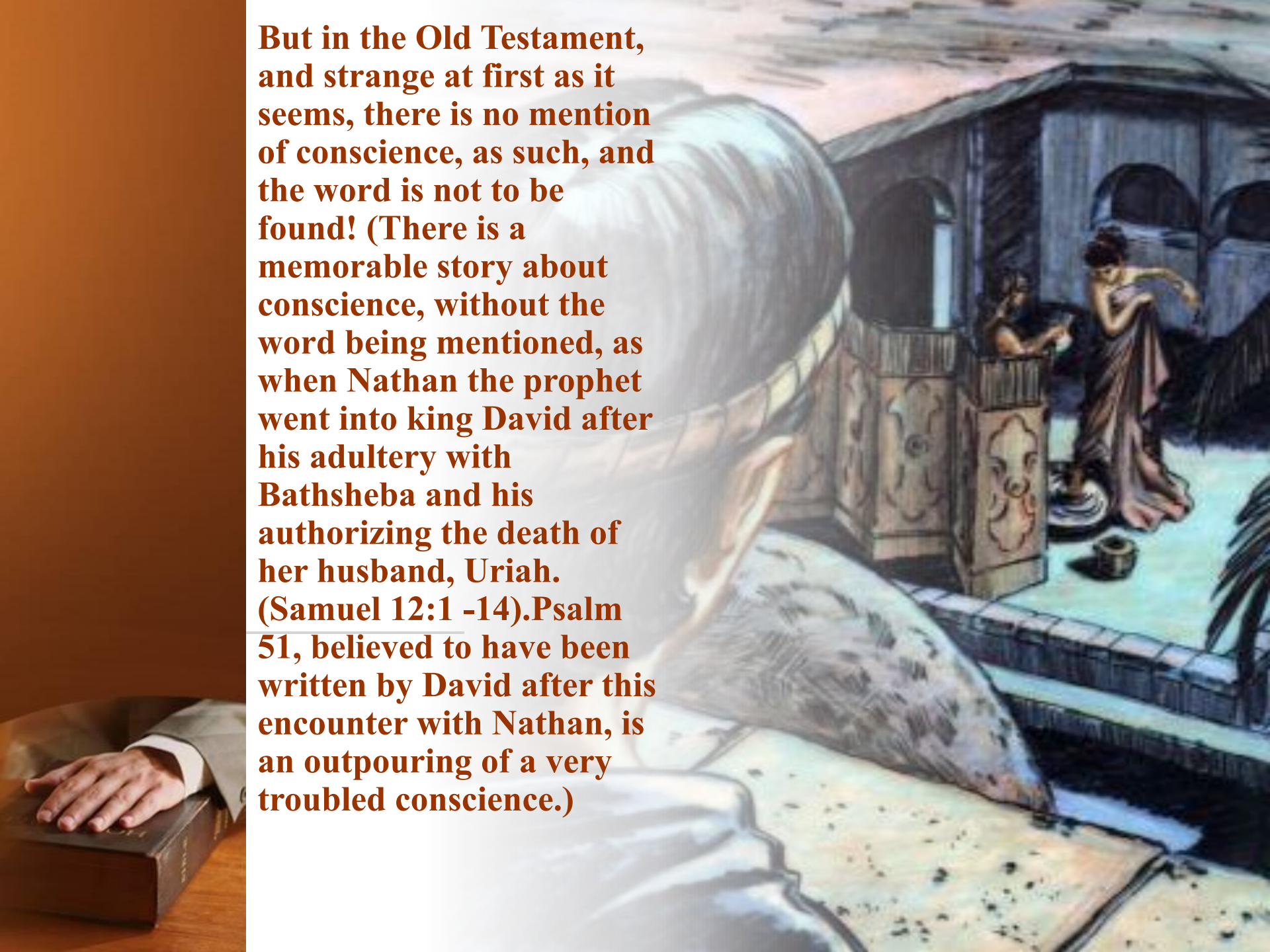
Indeed, we are outraged when people seem to be oblivious to conscience and unrestrained by it. I remember the outrage over the looting of a newly overturned truck on the Motorway near where I live, even as the driver lay fatally injured in the destroyed cabin of the vehicle.

We live with assumptions about **the impact and influence of conscience on people's behaviour**. And this is usefully noted: it is only when conscience weakens as a restraining influence in community life, and so far as people's behaviour is concerned, that laws have to be enacted and penalties imposed. External restraints begin to be needed when internal restraints are no longer effective. We might once have hoped that people's social conscience would restrain them from throwing rubbish out of their cars but - and the evidence being that conscience is not sufficiently strong in that area - laws and penalties have had to be imposed.

Conscience is pivotal, too, where our relationship with the Lord is concerned. **The Lord leads, guides, restrains, nudges and awakens us to right attitudes and behaviour via our conscience.** And so it is not surprising it is mentioned in the Bible, or in the Word here. Do you remember the story of the woman taken in adultery, in John's Gospel, Chapter 8?

The Scribes and Pharisees had brought to Jesus, we read there, “a woman caught in adultery”. And these Scribes and Pharisees reminded Jesus what Moses in the law, had commanded in such situations, that she should be stoned. “What do you say?” they pointedly asked Him. Remarkably He stayed silent, for we read, “But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with his finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up, and said to them, ‘He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.’ And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.” Do you remember what happened next?“Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one…”

But in the Old Testament, and strange at first as it seems, there is no mention of conscience, as such, and the word is not to be found! (There is a memorable story about conscience, without the word being mentioned, as when Nathan the prophet went into king David after his adultery with Bathsheba and his authorizing the death of her husband, Uriah. (Samuel 12:1 -14).Psalm 51, believed to have been written by David after this encounter with Nathan, is an outpouring of a very troubled conscience.)



Notwithstanding the fact that the word ‘conscience’ doesn’t appear in the Old Testament, its role, its relevance, and its importance is, however, highlighted and identified in the stories of the prophets, especially in the story of Samuel, the first of the prophets. What is without doubt is that Samuel was the conscience of his people. It was Samuel who lifted his people’s thinking onto a higher level; who reminded them of a higher purpose in life; who urged on them God-fearing standards of behaviour.

And the story of Samuel, as we have it here in the Word of God, in its deeper, internal or spiritual meaning, is all about the role of conscience in our lives, yours and mine.

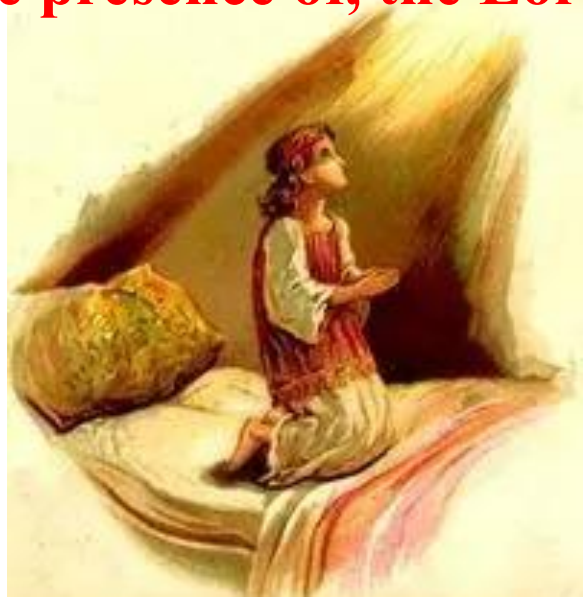
Let me just run through with you some of the highlights of Samuel’s life and ministry and see these in relation to the role and influence of conscience in our lives.

For one thing, life for and amongst Samuel's people was unruly and indeed chaotic before he came on the scene. If I can take you back into the book of Judges and to the period immediately before his birth, it is said there that "In those days there was no king in Israel; and everyone did what was right in his own eyes." This was a 'directionless' people this is describing; competing voices; different ways to success and happiness being urged. Samuel brought cohesion and unity and focus. His was a voice that came to prevail over all. He spoke up for and identified higher goals and aspirations, something which conscience is all about.

The next thing, usefully noted, is that even as a child he learned to be fearless in saying what had to be said and in exposing waywardness. At times he came across as inflexible and demanding – just as conscience does.

What is particularly significant and – when we understand its significance – quite beautiful, is that it was Samuel's role to open up the doors of the Tabernacle; "to open the doors of the house of the Lord", it says. **And this is the third thing and it takes us right to the heart of what conscience does.**

- The role of conscience is – and very much so – **to open up our lives to higher and more interior levels.**
- It is its role **to open up the way so that the spiritual can flow down into the natural.**
- Its role, in a very real sense, is **to bring us closer to and, indeed, into the presence of, the Lord.**



And remember this: the story of Samuel begins with him as a fragile baby and vulnerable child. He needed care and protection. His mother made him a little coat each year. (See 1 Samuel 2: verse 19). And this highlights two truths about Conscience we need to know.

Firstly, Conscience is at first, with us, fragile and vulnerable. It needs protecting and nurturing. It can easily be lost to us. It needs our care and attention if it is to survive and thrive.

Secondly,Conscience grows and develops. It is not static. It is not the same as when we are children as it becomes when we are adults.

Since it is so crucial and plays such a crucial, pivotal role, how is conscience formed?

Conscience is informed, and grows, from the truths we learn and take to heart, simple at first when we are children, and more profound and seen to be so much more life related, as we grow older.

As well, what feeds into Conscience are good and inspiring examples we see in others and positive experiences (as when we have felt heaven close) that have left a deep impression on us. Just let's recall from the Reading set aside in connection with this sermon: "Conscience in a person is formed from the beliefs that his religion has given him, depending on how deeply he accepts them." (Arcana Caelestia 9112) And as new spiritual values are learned and taken on board by us our conscience is strengthened.

It is and has been urged that conscience is the voice of God and therefore infallible, unchangeable and unchallengeable. In connection with times of war we hear and read about“conscientious objectors”. Associated with this is the belief is that such a conscience is not, therefore, to be challenged; that it is inviolable. But the greater truth is that Conscience can be explored with us or with another; modified and revised, in the light of greater understanding or a shift in our loves.

Arising out of this, too, is the fact that **conscience is going to vary with people**; from different backgrounds; in different cultures and religions; according to what people have been brought up to believe is good and true, right and proper. What one person, therefore, can happily do, you or I would, from conscience, be in turmoil about. But not them. And what we might do, untroubled by conscience, others from another upbringing and on the basis of their understanding of right and wrong, could recoil from.

There is a fascinating teaching in the Writings about overburdening conscience, as can happen. If we are not careful we can make certain things matters of conscience, which are not appropriately ascribed to it. For instance, social conventions, other externals and diet. If someone chooses to be a vegetarian this is not so much a matter of conscience, but a choice. It is not life or death, heaven or hell. **But a genuine conscience, formed from the truths of the Word of God, is.**

As was touched on earlier, there is often part of us that wants to quarrel with our conscience. And it is what we sometimes do. At our most exasperated or tested moments we wish we didn't know or remember one or other of the Commandments God gave through Moses or the values Jesus taught. Other people, we tell ourselves, don't seem to care, so why should we? But conscience is not our enemy. **We need to embrace it as our friend; and as a life saving friend at that!**

Let me just refer you here to Arcana Caelestia paragraph 8002, sub-section 2, where it reads, "Conscience is the plane into which the angels flow and through which we have consort with them." This is amazing! Conscience is where we meet with the angels and they with us. To feel conscience is to know the angels active with us, having drawn closer to us than at other times.

And here is something to really hold on to: that however weak, relatively, the voice or pangs of conscience may be, it is nevertheless a sign that the angels have a foothold (tiny though it be) in our lives which, if not in this world, then in the next they would expand and develop.

Swedenorg wrote: "If any one, by fighting against evils because they are sins, acquires for himself in the world something of spiritual life, even though very little, he is saved, and his uses afterwards increase, like mustard seed growing into a tree, according to the Lord's words in Matthew 13:32, etc).(《The Divine Love》 17, paragraph 5)

We fight against evils because our conscience alerts us to the presence of some disorderly, sinful, thought that has come to us or feeling that is stirring us.

With regard to parental responsibility in the forming of conscience in their children this, too, needs to be noted: Every parent, indeed all of us who have contact with children and the young, yearn for them to enjoy the happiest and most fulfilled life possible. We seek to provide for them materially, understandable so. Grandparents will pay for School fees. We want the best education possible for them. Again, understandably! We want our children to grow up, be fulfilled, well liked, happy and well-adjusted adults.

In fact, though, it is those who have, and live from, a robust and healthy conscience who stand the best chance of living with integrity and self-respect, in peace and mind and serenity of spirit.

"Conscience" we read "regarded in itself is not any distress, but is a spiritual willingness to do what religion and faith dictate. Thus it is that with those who enjoy a conscience live in tranquil peace and inward blessedness." (True Christian Religion 666) Tranquil peace and inward blessedness. It's actually what the name 'Shiloh' means, in Hebrew. Calmness and tranquility. It's where the Lord revealed – and reveals! –Himself. Conscience, calmness, tranquility and the presence of the Lord are all linked beautifully together.

What - beyond this – could you really wish for, for a child? And so here is where our focus with them needs to be. It is the greatest gift we can work with the Lord to leave them with,

"Then the LORD appeared again in Shiloh. For the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel."

Amen

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