

CHAPTER 4

THE DISPENSATION OF CONSCIENCE

From the Fall to the Flood

In the last chapter we studied man's fall into sin. God put into the hand of innocent Adam a very simple command and Adam failed to obey it. Adam's act of disobedience is spoken of in Romans 5:19: "For as by one man's _____ many were made _____" What were some of the consequences or results of Adam's fall into sin (see the last chapter)?

The second dispensation has been called "the dispensation of conscience." As we begin this dispensation men are no longer INNOCENT. Men are fallen, sinful creatures who are in great need of the GRACE of God (see Genesis 6:8). The dispensation of conscience extends from the FALL to the FLOOD.

1. MAN'S STATE AT THE BEGINNING.

What was the name of the tree whose fruit Adam was told not to eat (Genesis 2:17)?

_____ In Genesis chapter 3 Satan came along to tempt Eve. Satan wanted her to think that God was not really being good to them and that they were really missing out on something. In Genesis 3:5 the devil told Eve that three things would happen to them in the day when they eat the forbidden fruit:

1. Your _____ will be _____
2. Ye shall be as God ["gods" should be translated as "God." It is the word "Elohim" as in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God..."]
3. Ye shall know "good and _____"

The devil wanted to make them think that they would GAIN from eating, but God had told them that they would LOSE (Genesis 2:17). Temptation is like a mousetrap or a fishing hook. The bait in the trap looks good to the mouse and the worm on the hook looks good to the fish. The mouse and the fish think that they are going to GAIN something but they end up big LOSERS! Eve got trapped and ended up a LOSER!

What verse in Genesis chapter 3 tells us that Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit? _____ In Genesis 3:7 we learn about the state of Adam and Eve immediately **after** they ate:

"And the _____ of them both were _____ and they _____ that they were naked." (Compare Genesis 2:25)

Did God need to tell Adam and Eve that they had sinned or did they know this themselves?
 _____ Adam and Eve **KNEW SOMETHING** immediately (Genesis 3:7)! They knew that they had done evil and failed to do good. They were **aware** of their sinful and shameful condition before a holy God. They were **conscious** of their failure and of their sin. They were not in the dark about this. Their **EYES WERE OPENED** and they knew about their sin. They **KNEW** that something was wrong!

When it was **too late** Adam and Eve saw the folly of what they had done. They saw the happiness they had fallen from and they saw the misery they had fallen into. They saw the good they had missed and they saw the evil which they had committed. God knows all about evil even though He has never experienced it. Adam and Eve learned about evil because they **EXPERIENCED** it. Before he sinned Adam never really knew evil.

Think of a young child who is strongly warned by parents not to touch a hot stove. In spite of the warnings, however, one day the child touches the stove and is burned. The young child now knows something that he never knew before. He now knows how good the stove feels untouched and how terrible it feels when touched! He never really knew this until he touched it and **EXPERIENCED** the pain. Likewise, Adam and Eve never really knew good and evil until the time when they sinned (SEE GENESIS 3:22--"to know _____ and _____").

What is the CONSCIENCE?

As we learn in the case of Adam and Eve, God has given to man the capacity or the ability to **KNOW** when he has sinned or when he has done right. Every person has a certain awareness or sense of what is right and what is wrong. This is something that God has built into man **FOR MAN'S GOOD**. God wants man to know when things are not right in his life so that man might fix whatever is wrong. When man sins or does wrong, God wants him to feel bad about it and to feel guilty about it. If man felt good about sin then man would never want to get the problem fixed!

Think about the physical body that God has given to us. God has built into our body certain indicators that tell us when things are not right. These are called **NERVES**. When something is wrong with the body or when the body gets injured, we feel it! It hurts! Are nerves helpful to man or harmful? None of us really enjoy **PAIN**, but if we think about it, we should be very thankful for the nerves that God has put into our body. What if you put your hand on a hot stove and did not feel any pain and did not even know that the stove was hot? Your hand would burn up without you even knowing it. The reason this does not happen is because the nerves send a quick message to the brain which says, "**OUCH! REMOVE HAND FROM STOVE RIGHT AWAY! IT HURTS!**" Did you know that if you had no nerves you might chew up and eat your own tongue (thinking that it's just part of your sandwich)? But with nerves working properly we do not need to worry about this. We may bite our tongue once, but that is all! It hurts! God wants us to know when things are not right with our body.

God also wants us to know when things are not right with our soul. This is why God has given to man a CONSCIENCE. The conscience is to the soul what nerves are to the body. The conscience lets us know when things are not right. When we sin the conscience triggers bad feelings. We know we have done wrong and we feel guilty about it. Animals do not have a conscience. An animal has no knowledge of good and evil. They live according to the instinctive patterns that God has built into them and they can be trained to do what men want them to do, but they do not have a conscience as men do. If a dog eats something that he should not eat or if a dog messes on the living room rug, he does not feel guilty about it (although he may have been trained to fear punishment if he does such things).

The conscience is that ability in man to make judgments about himself. When Adam sinned God did not need to appear to him and say, "YOU HAVE SINNED AND I WANT YOU TO KNOW THIS!" God never had to say this to Adam because Adam already knew it. Adam was able to make a self-judgment: "ADAM, YOU ARE GUILTY! YOU HAVE SINNED AND DISOBEYED GOD!" As we learned from Genesis 3:7, Adam was very much aware of his sin.

The Red Light on the Dashboard

The conscience is like a "warning system" which God has built into man. It alerts us to the fact that something is wrong and something needs to be fixed!

The conscience can be compared to the red light or warning light that is found on the dashboard of many cars. This light was built into the car as a warning system to let the driver know that the motor is getting too hot (or that the brakes have a problem or that the engine needs service, etc.). When the red light flashes this means that there is a problem that needs to be fixed. The wise driver will heed the warning and do something about the problem. He will open the hood and get to work or bring the car into the auto repair shop!

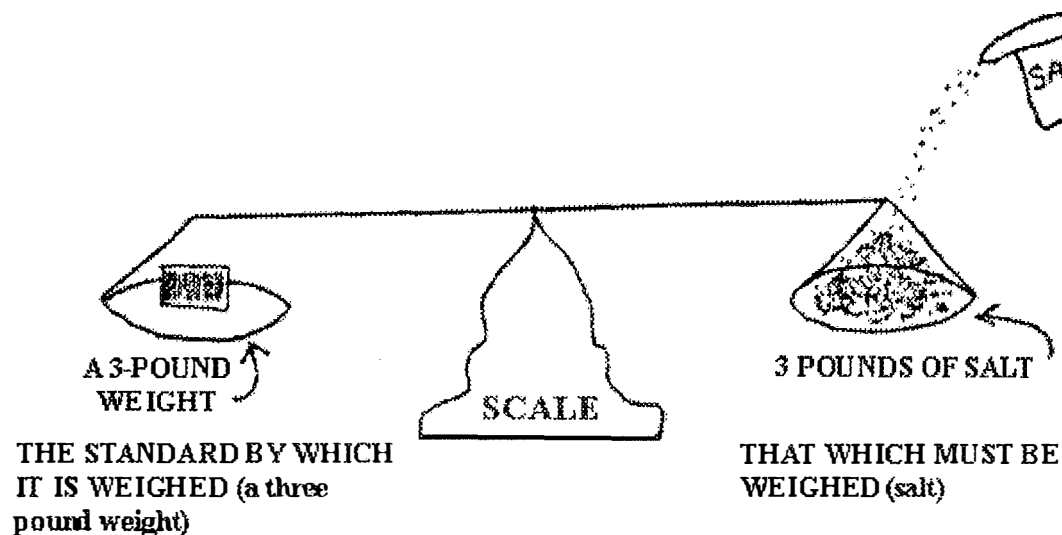
The foolish driver might say, "I hate that little red light that keeps flashing. It bothers me!" He then takes a hammer and smashes it! But does this really solve the problem? This is like touching the hot stove without nerves in your hand! The foolish driver may keep driving and he may be glad that the annoying light no longer flashes, but later he finds that his car will not work at all (because of over-heating or some other problem). He failed to realize that the red light was his friend not his foe.

There are many people who try to use this "hammer method" on their conscience. When their conscience bothers them, instead of fixing the problem they try to get rid of the bad feelings which the conscience has triggered. This is like smashing the red light with a hammer. They may try using pills or drugs or alcohol or shock treatments or other things, but none of these things are helping to fix the real problem. If Adam had gotten drunk, he may not have felt so bad, but he would still have the same problem!

If a person keeps hitting the red light with his fist, the day might come when the red light does not work at all! It is broken and no longer sensitive. The motor might get very hot due to a broken fan belt, but the light will not even go on. The Bible tells us that people can have the kind of conscience that no longer works as it should. Notice 1 Timothy 4:2-- "speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their _____ seared with a hot iron." The word "sear" means "to brand, to burn or scorch with intense heat." A man's conscience can be seared and branded with sin and wrong so that it does not convict him or judge him as it should. The conscience has been so burnt that it no longer sends out the right signals. It is like the red light that no longer flashes even though there might be something very wrong with the car.

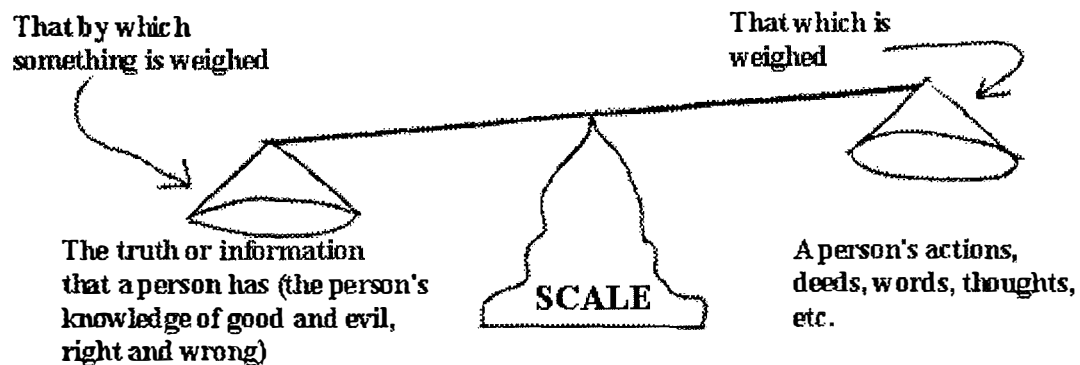
Weighing Scales

The conscience may be compared to weighing scales. We can think of the conscience as a scale of SELF JUDGMENT. We need to weigh our actions and our words and our deeds, and before we act or speak we need to make a judgment: IS THIS RIGHT OR WRONG? IS THIS GOOD OR EVIL? SHOULD I OR SHOULD I NOT? Also **after** we act or speak the conscience makes a judgment: WAS THIS RIGHT OR WRONG? SHOULD I HAVE DONE THIS OR NOT? To get the right answers we must have an accurate scale.



We must notice that the scale's accuracy depends on how good the standard weight is. Suppose the standard weight was labeled as 3 pounds but actually only weighed 2 pounds. When the scale is balanced, how many pounds of salt will you really have measured out? _____ You will only have two pounds of salt but you will think that you have three pounds. If you were to really put three pounds of salt on the right hand side, then the scale would be out of balance (because the weight on the left hand side really only weighs 2 pounds). This will lead to problems.

The conscience is like a scale. In order to weigh things accurately it needs an accurate standard of truth. If the conscience does not have the right information or if it lacks an accurate knowledge of good and evil, then it will not weigh things properly. Something may be wrong that is judged right or something may be right that is judged wrong. The conscience can only work with the information which it has. A scale can only work well if it has accurate weights. The more a person learns and understands God's Word, the more accurate his scale will be.



Usually the Conscience Works Well

God has put into men a basic knowledge of what is right and what is wrong. Man must judge his behavior in light of this basic knowledge that he has. A man's conscience is only as good as his own knowledge of good and evil.

God gave the children of Israel the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and other laws so that they would know what is right and what is wrong. They knew that it was wrong to murder and steal and *covet* (desire what belongs to someone else), because their written laws clearly spoke against all these things.

But what about people who never had God's written law? Do they know what is good and what is evil? Do they know what is right and what is wrong? The surprising answer to these questions is found in Romans 2:14-15. Paul is talking about the Gentiles who "have _____ the law" (Romans 2:14). These are people who have never seen the Ten Commandments. But Romans 2:15 says that the Gentiles "show the work of the law _____ in their _____, their _____ also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while **accusing** ("YOU'RE GUILTY! WHAT YOU DID IS WRONG!") or else **excusing** ("YOU'RE NOT GUILTY! WHAT YOU DID IS RIGHT!") one another."

In these verses we learn that even in the hearts of those people who do not have the written law, God has put a knowledge of right and wrong. When they do **RIGHT** their conscience **applauds** them and cheers. When they do **WRONG** their conscience **condemns** them and says "boo!" Their conscience (the "nerves of their soul") works very well.

Here are two examples of people who did not have God's written law, but who certainly knew right and wrong:

1) ABIMELECH, A GENTILE KING

In Genesis 26:6-16 we have the story of Isaac and Abimelech. Abimelech was a Philistine king. He was a Gentile king who did not have a copy of the 10 Commandments and he did not have a Bible.

Isaac lied to this man and told him that Rebekah was his S _____ (Genesis 26:7) even though she was really his wife. When Abimelech discovered that she was married to Isaac he was very concerned. If one of his men had taken Rebekah as a wife, this would have been ADULTERY! A man must never take a woman who is already married! Did this king know that adultery was wrong (see Genesis 26:10-11)? _____ This man was not saved and he did not have the 10 Commandments, but he knew that adultery was wrong! He had the works of the law written in his heart and his conscience condemned the idea of taking a woman who already was married.

2) THE BARBARIANS OF MELITA (or Malta).

In Acts 28:1-6 we learn about a group of friendly barbarians or foreigners who lived on the island of Melita. These were unsaved people who had no Bible and who had no copy of the Ten Commandments. They were ignorant of God's written law, but they had the works of the law written in their hearts. What creature bit Paul on the hand (Acts 28:3)? _____ When the barbarians saw this they said, "No doubt this man is a _____" (Acts 28:4). These people knew that it was evil and wrong to murder and they also knew that murderers deserve to die! They thought that Paul was getting just what he deserved. They thought they were witnessing the penalty being carried out, so they assumed the crime. They soon found out that they were wrong about Paul (Acts 28:5-6), but they were right in their knowledge of good and evil. They knew that murder was evil because they had the works of the law written in their hearts! They also knew that the death penalty was appropriate for murderers (compare Genesis 9:6 and see our study on Capital Punishment).

All men, whether Jews (those who directly have the written Old Testament law) and Gentiles (those who do not have the written Old Testament law) are responsible for their actions before God. This is because God has revealed to all men what is right and what is wrong.

Sometimes the Conscience Does Not Work Quite Right

Think again of the red warning light in the car. This light was made to work well and to warn people when the car has a problem. It is possible, however, for this light to give the wrong signal. For example, suppose there is some kind of electrical problem. This might cause the light to go on even though there is nothing wrong with the car. The signal says, "Something is wrong!" but when you open the hood you see that everything is fine. The problem was with the light and not with the car.

It is possible to have a conscience that does not work quite right. In 1 Corinthians 8:1-8 we learn about some believers who thought that it was wrong to eat things that were offered unto idols. Their conscience was W _____ (1 Corinthians 8:7) and they needed more knowledge. What they were doing was not wrong in itself, but they thought it was wrong, and when they did it their conscience condemned them and made them feel guilty.

Some people today feel it is wrong to kill animals. If they step on a beetle or swat a fly they feel real bad about it. They should not have a problem with this but they do because their conscience (in this particular area) is weak. Another person could slaughter a pig and not feel bad about it at all (assuming he was doing this for the right reason, and not just to be cruel to animals).

Saul of Tarsus (also known as Paul) had a conscience that was sending signals based on wrong information. He thought that persecuting Christians was the right thing to do (Acts 26:9-11)! He actually thought that he was serving God by waging war on Christian believers (compare John 16:2)! Later Paul received some needed information (Acts chapter 9) and he realized how wrong he had been!

In most cases, however, men know what is right and what is wrong and their conscience sends them the right signal. Adam and Eve and their children had a conscience that worked very well. They had a keen awareness of the difference between right and wrong.

2. MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY.

Man had a knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:22). With knowledge there also comes responsibility. Man was responsible to live according to the knowledge which he had. Man was obligated to do what was good and to refrain from doing what was evil. Man was to do what his conscience would approve and man was to avoid doing what his conscience would condemn.

Consider Genesis 4:2-5. Which man did what was good (compare Hebrews 11:4)?

_____ Which man did what was evil (compare 1 John 3:12)? _____

After Cain did the wrong thing he was angry and depressed (Genesis 4:5). These bad feelings which he had were triggered by his conscience and he should have recognized them as "warning signals." Something was wrong with his life that needed to be fixed!

God came to Cain and gave him an opportunity to get things fixed (Genesis 4:6-7). Cain had two choices. He could "do W _____" (Genesis 4:7) or he could "not do well" (Genesis 4:7). He was responsible to DO WELL (do what is right and good). Failure to DO WELL would mean that SIN (his old sin nature) would be lying at the door like a wild animal ready to pounce on him and destroy him! Did Cain *do well* or did he go and *do evil* (Genesis 4:8-9)?

_____ Cain refused to heed God's warnings and he refused to heed the "warning lights" of his own conscience.

3. MAN'S FAILURE.

In Genesis chapter 6 we read about the sad failure of man in the days before the flood. What was "very great" in the earth (Genesis 6:5)? _____ What kind of thoughts did man continually form in his mind (Genesis 6:5)? _____ We also learn that the earth was _____ (spoiled) before God and the earth was filled with _____ (Genesis 6:11). This corruption was the rule and not the exception. It was a corruption that had spread among all of humanity: "for _____ flesh had _____ his way upon the earth." (see Genesis 6:12).

These days were very dark, but there were a few bright spots. There were a few people who "DID WELL" and who believed God. In Hebrews 11:4-7 we have the names of three men who lived during this time and who pleased God. What were their names?

1. _____ (see Genesis 4)
2. _____ (see Genesis 5)
3. _____ (see Genesis 6)

There were a few godly men in these days, but not many. In Jude 14-15 we read the words of a message that godly Enoch preached to the people of his day. How many times do you find the word "UNGODLY" in verse 15? _____ Enoch was a very godly man who lived in a very ungodly world!

4. GOD'S JUDGMENT.

What was the judgment that God brought upon this world which had become so corrupt (Genesis 7:11,12,23)?

How many people were spared this judgment (1 Peter 3:20 and 2 Peter 2:5)? _____ At the end of this dispensation there were only _____ people left! Will such a judgment (WORLD WIDE FLOOD) ever be repeated again (Genesis 9:11,15-16)? _____

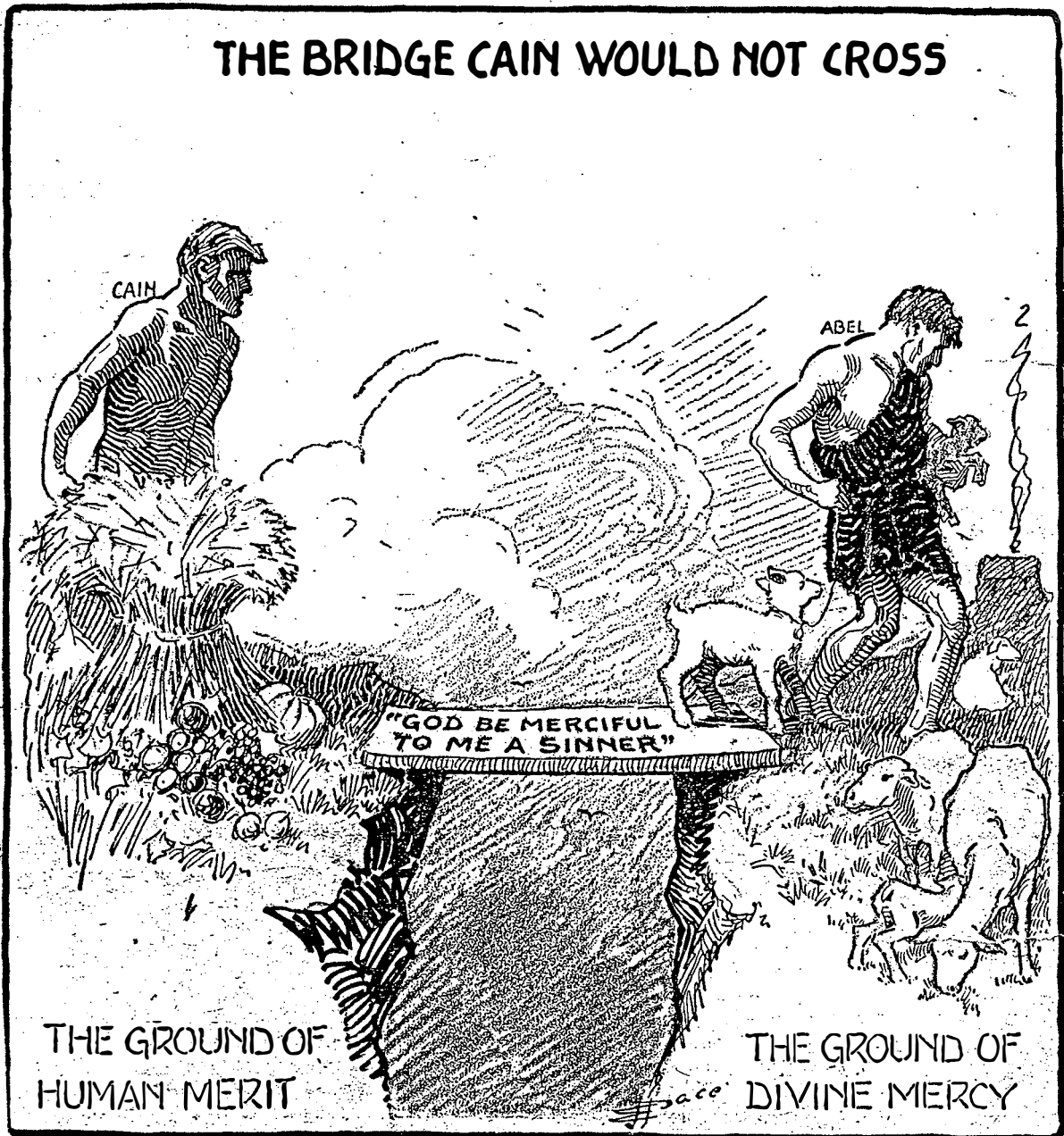
The Dispensation Ends But Conscience Continues

Even though the dispensation of conscience ends, men continue to live under conscience. The conscience is something that all men possess regardless of when they have lived on the earth. In every dispensation (including today) men are responsible to follow that which is good and avoid that which is evil. This is what Job did (Job 1:1—"eschewed" means "avoided" or "departed from"). This is what we are commanded to do today (Romans 12:9 and 1 Peter 3:11). God does not want us to "let our conscience be our guide." **The Word of God (the Bible) is our guide.** It is the Bible that tells us what is good and what is evil. It is the Bible that we should follow. Jesus said, "Thy Word (God's Word) is _____" (John 17:17). Remember the scale illustration. That which is true and right needs to be added to the scale so that we can more and more weigh accurately the right and the wrong. If a person's conscience has been enlightened by God's Word, then it will approve what God's Word approves and condemn what God's Word condemns. In other words, it will send out the right signals. The scale will be very accurate.

The "happy" person, according to Romans 14:22, is the person who does only what his conscience will approve of. It is never safe to do something that your conscience will condemn. Only do it if your conscience gives a green light. If it gives a red light or even a yellow light (CAUTION!) then you better not do it. "Whatsoever is not of _____ is _____" (Romans 14:23). This verse means that it is very dangerous for a person to do what he **believes** is wrong. It is dangerous to ignore the signals that come from your conscience. In some cases it is possible that your conscience might be weak and sending the wrong signals. Additional knowledge or information from God's Word will correct this. You may discover that what you thought was wrong was not wrong at all and what you thought was right was not right at all. Always be careful to follow this rule: **NEVER DO WHAT YOU BELIEVE IS WRONG! ALWAYS DO WHAT YOU BELIEVE IS RIGHT!**

How accurate is your conscience? How keen is your sense of right and wrong? When you need to weigh right and wrong (and we need to do this every day), how accurate is your scale? Are you reading the Bible to find out what is really right and what is really wrong? Are you giving your scale the kind of information it needs to weigh things accurately? A little child cannot make adult judgments. A little child may take candy from a store and not even feel bad about it. An older child may do this but his conscience will probably bother him because he knows that what he is doing is wrong.

May our scale be an accurate scale, and may we be careful to do what we know is good and avoid what we know is evil.



Cain and Abel

"And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord.

And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering.

But unto Cain and to his offering He had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell." Genesis 4:3-5

Cain was a very religious man. Contrary to common belief Cain was very conscious of his duty toward God and the need of doing something to please the Almighty. When we speak of Cain we immediately think of him as a murderer, but the sin of murder was the result of Cain's wrong religion. Let me repeat, Cain was very, very religious. From the record which we read we can assume that he was more religious than his brother Abel. For it was not Abel who first suggested bringing an offering unto the Lord, but Cain. The record is clear,

"And in process of time it came to pass that CAIN brought of the fruit of the ground an OFFERING UNTO THE LORD." Genesis 4:3

Notice three things here. Cain was the first one to think of bringing a sacrifice. Cain brought an offering, and third, we are told he brought it UNTO THE LORD. This was an act of worship as part of Cain's religion. Cain had deep convictions concerning man's duty toward God and the need of an offering. But all his convictions and all his sincerity did not avail him one bit as long as he rejected the provisions God had laid down for an acceptable sacrifice. Later on Abel, his brother, also brought an offering, probably prompted by the fact that his very religious brother, Cain, had already done so.

Cain became a murderer only after his religion had failed, and rather than repent and accept God's provision he became angry with his fundamentalist brother and slew him. These two sons of Adam therefore stand on the threshold of human history as the representatives of all religion in all ages to follow. For there are only two religions. The religion of Cain corresponding to the fig leaves of Adam and Eve; and the religion of the blood of Christ, represented by Abel, and by the coats of skins which God provided for Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Man has classified religions in many, many ways, and counts them by the hundreds and thousands of religious creeds, sects, denominations, or whatever you may choose to call them. But all of them group themselves under these two heads, the religion of Cain, and the religion of Abel, the religion of Grace or the religion of Works. It has nothing to do with ceremonies or forms of worship. It has nothing to do with the place of the building or the names of its officers or the ritual of its service. Wherever the blood of Jesus Christ is preached as the only atonement for sin, and where men and women are told they need but to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved, there we find again the religion of Abel. Be that in a stately cathedral with soft music and meticulously dressed officials, or in a simple mud hut without organ or choir, where Jesus Christ the Son of God is exalted and the blood preached, there we find Abel's offering. And the reverse is true. Wherever the blood is denied, there we have a repetition of the offering of Cain. It may be ever so beautiful and represent ever so much labor and work and toil, it cannot avail. Whether it be in the most magnificent church building with carpeting and expensive pew, with high-degree minister and the elite of the world as officials, with the best choir and most costly organ, or whether it be in a tumble-down store building in a dim alley without physical attraction, wherever the blood is denied and grace is ignored there you will find once more the sacrifice and the religion of Cain.

CAIN'S OFFERING

Now there were many good points from the religious standpoint about the offering of Cain. He did not deny the existence of God. He recognized that, when he brought an offering to the Lord. Cain was not an atheist. He also believed in the need of salvation for he brought his offering, and yet all of it was of no avail. In our previous message we pointed out that God had taught Adam and Eve that FIG LEAVES could not cover their nakedness and then made them coats of skins teaching them three things, as follows:

1. Salvation is God's gift—not by man's work.
2. Salvation is by the death of an innocent substitute.
3. Salvation is by the shedding of blood.

Without doubt Adam and Eve had imparted this revelation of God to their children. Where else did Cain get his knowledge of the need of an offering? And so there was no excuse for Cain, for Adam and Eve had made the requirements plain enough; for Abel, Cain's younger brother had understood what God had taught. Now Cain was religious, and sincere, and ambitious and zealous, but he did not BELIEVE God meant what He said. He ignored the Word of God and chose to put his own interpretation upon what God had said, so let me repeat, he denied the absolute and inerrant authority of the Word of God. He took what he wanted and placed his own interpretation upon the rest. He was a full-fledged modernist. He did not cast the whole Word of God aside, OH NO, not that, but he twisted it to suit his own philosophy. And of all infidels, the worst and most dangerous man is not the one who openly and blatantly rejects the Word of God and throws it out completely, but the worst of all deceivers is the one who uses pious language, and is very religious, and moralizes from the Bible and uses fundamental terminology, the while he carefully rejects the blood, the diety of Christ, His bodily resurrection, and the truth of grace. Poison is all the more dangerous when it is sugar coated, and error is all the more dangerous when it is coated with a religious and pious phraseology.

**Taken from the booklet
Religion or Christ
by Dr. M. R. DeHaan
(Radio Bible Class)**