

THE POWER OF A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

ERWIN W. LUTZER



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those whose conscience tells them that they have sinned too much to be forgiven, or those who think their past must define their future. These pages were written so that all might understand that when we have done our worst, grace stands by to do its best.

“Now the law came to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:20-21).



Contents

1. Out of the Shadows	7
2. It's Not All Your Fault	23
3. The Voice of God or the Voice of the Devil	39
4. No Condemnation: No Need for Suicide	51
5. The Truth That Hurts and Heals	67
6. The Healing Power of Light	83
7. Conflicts of Conscience	101
8. Becoming That Impossible Person	115
9. Forever Forgiven	133
10. When Sorry Isn't Enough	145
11. A Clear Conscience:	
Engaging a Hostile Culture	163
Notes	173

Out of the Shadows

*There is no witness so terrible and no accuser
so powerful as conscience which dwells within us.*

SOPHOCLES

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare wrote, “Conscience does make cowards of us all.” How true! It doesn’t matter what your background is, what religious tradition you were brought up in, or whether you were raised in a nonreligious home. I can assure you that you have at times violated your conscience. Our conscience sits in judgment on all of our actions and says, “Aha! You have violated what you know to be right.”

In the book *The Holy War* by John Bunyan, there’s a town called Mansoul (man’s soul) that’s taken over by Diabolos (the devil), who is the false prince. This evil ruler takes control over the city except for the town crier, namely Old Man, Conscience. Although Diabolos takes control, occasionally the town crier (Conscience) rings the bell and runs up and down the street saying, “Diabolos is a liar and a cheat! Prince Emmanuel is the true prince of Mansoul!” In other words, in a world of universal delusion it’s the voice of Conscience that reminds people that there is a higher law to which all must yield. The Liar, Diabolos, doesn’t have the last word.

In 1968, English businessman Donald Crowhurst veered off course in the *Golden Globe* yacht race around the world, but evidently attempted to steal victory by lying low on the coast of South America and waiting to rejoin his competitors when they circled back around. He sent false radio reports of his progress and might have fooled the world had not his deceit riddled him with guilt.

Crowhurst suspected that his hoax would be discovered, so he jumped overboard and drowned. He left his records intact, which exposed his deception so that all of the world could see that he had planned to win the race by cheating. It appeared as though he wanted to die, admitting to what he had done and clearing his conscience as best he could.

Our conscience has the power to bless us or condemn us; it can drive us to do great ventures for God, or it can lead us to anger, sleepless nights, and an unending cycle of despair. This internal voice will not be satisfied with our rationalizations.

What Is the Conscience?

What is the conscience? The word itself comes from two words: *con*, which means “with,” and *science*, which means “knowledge.” Conscience is “knowledge along with us,” or more specifically, the knowledge we carry *within* us. The conscience is powerful, and in this opening chapter we’re going to look at its origin and its implications for us.

There are three characteristics of the conscience that are important for our study.

First, *conscience is universal*. Every person has a conscience. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul argues that the Jews, who had the law of God and therefore knew His will, and the Gentiles, who did not have the written law, have both violated God’s standards and stand guilty before Him. The Jews are convicted by God’s law, Paul says, while the Gentiles will be judged by their conscience:

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (Romans 2:14-16).

As for the Gentiles, their conscience is either going to accuse or excuse them. The conscience is the rudimentary law of God written on every human heart.

I spoke with a woman who said she was comfortable with atheism. If God was there, He wasn't there for her when she needed Him. Yet she did admit to guilt, twinges of regret, and the inner recognition that she had seriously misbehaved. She confessed some dirty laundry that she had to process and said she had no means to wipe her slate clean. "I know that when I face death," she said, "I will begin to worry if there is 'something on the other side.'"

Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that everyone has the same standard of right and wrong. Rather, I am saying that everyone has a conscience that sits in judgment on their actions, even if the verdict of conscience sometimes differs from culture to culture and from home to home.

We've all gone through metal detectors at the airport; sometimes my belt buckle has set off the alarm, other times it hasn't. I'm told that machines can be tuned to be more sensitive or less sensitive. Just so, my conscience might be set at one reading and yours at another; my conscience might disapprove of an action that yours approves of. In minor matters, our inner judge might render a different verdict, but in the basics of morality, there is general agreement. And every individual has at times experienced that inner voice that tells him, "What you did wasn't right."

Even pagans have a conscience. This distinguishes us from animals; yes, animals can experience some sense of shame, depending on human conditioning, but there is no evidence that animals can actually be troubled by their own behavior. The lion is not bothered about depriving a mother deer of her fawn; the snake is not troubled by destroying the eggs of a bird; the bear is not troubled for mauling a child. One piece of evidence for the existence of God is that human beings, created in His image, live with an “ought” deep within.

Second, *conscience can be conditioned*. This feature of the human conscience can have both positive and negative effects. In an entirely different context, Paul talks about some Christians whose conscience prohibits them from doing something (such as eating meat that has been offered to idols), while other Christians’ consciences give them the freedom to do so (see Romans 14:1-4, 10-12). In a future chapter, we shall discuss these differences in detail.

So although the conscience is not always an infallible guide, it either approves or disapproves of the basic moral decisions we make. Almost universally the conscience witnesses within us that stealing, lying, and sexual immorality are wrong.

Third, *conscience has tremendous power*. It can haunt us day and night, and eventually destroy us. Later on, we’re going to talk about Lady Macbeth from Shakespeare’s play, whose tormented conscience drove her to suicide. (The good news is that Lady Macbeth didn’t have to commit suicide, and no one else does either.)

Here’s our dilemma: Our conscience usually doesn’t trouble us before we commit a particular act; it remains silent even when we contemplate wrongdoing. But afterward, especially as we lie down to sleep at night, it keeps interrupting our peace. I have little doubt that the reason sleeping pills are used so widely is because so many go to bed with a conscience that robs them of rest. Conscience can prevent us from falling asleep at night and it awakens us early in the morning. Sometimes it yells at us.

I'm friends with a Christian man whose mother checked into a psychiatric ward a number of times while he was growing up. When he was twenty-two, his mother confessed to him that the man he thought was his father wasn't his biological father after all. His father was actually a doctor in the community with whom she'd had an affair.

Imagine what this startling confession did to this young man. He struggled emotionally and spiritually, trying to come to terms with who he really was, and questioning his self-worth. After all, strictly speaking, he should not have been born.

Yet today he has an effective ministry and speaks in various churches with joy, challenging people to experience spiritual renewal. He is proof that your parental origin doesn't have to stop you from enjoying a blessed life and making a positive impact. The key is to take advantage of the marvelous, incredible grace of God.

We shouldn't be surprised that after his mother confessed her years of deception, she didn't have to return to the psychiatric ward. At last she was at peace. I remember reading the words of a doctor who said, "I could dismiss half of my patients if I could just look them in the eye and give them the assurance that they are forgiven."

The eminent psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a famous book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* in which he said:

The very word, "sin," which seems to have disappeared, was a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. But the word went away. It has almost disappeared—the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn't anyone sin anymore? Doesn't anyone believe in sin?¹

Dr. Menninger was arguing that mental health and moral health are inseparably linked, so he insisted that agents of moral teaching—such as educators and parents—are just as necessary to a person's well-being as the psychiatrist. Of course, as we shall learn, ultimately, only God can clear our conscience.

There is a man who is a wonderful Christian with a lovely wife and children. But every time he was asked to be an elder in his church, he said no. He was asked, “Why? You are gifted. You know the Bible.”

But years later, he confessed to his pastor that when he was in college, he’d had an affair with a young woman who had his child, who was now growing up in another city. He knew he was forgiven by God, but because he kept this secret from his wife, he was always haunted by his past. Spiritually and mentally, he was unable to get beyond his past. He knew that his silence was deception, and he also knew that one day his son might appear at his front door. No matter how often he justified his silence, the fact of his son was always present in his mind. (In a future chapter, we will discuss the topic of reconciliation with others.)

In the book of Acts, the early disciples were characterized as having joy and gladness (see 2:46). The primary reason for their joy was because they had experienced forgiveness that had freed them from condemnation. The apostle John beautifully expressed this joy and freedom: “Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God” (1 John 3:21). If we have a condemning conscience, we can still believe, but not with very much “confidence before God.”

The purpose of this book is to help you live with the confidence that comes from a conscience that is clear before God and before others. Someone has said that we are all either in denial or in recovery! Hopefully in these pages our denial will be exposed and we will move on to recovery.

The Origin of the Conscience

Let’s go back to the beginning. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had a perfect environment: They had all the beauty, all the food, and all the other comforts of life they could ever want.

What is more, they had fellowship with God, who came walking with them “in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8). Theologians use the word *innocence* to describe this couple before sin entered the world. Think of the joy they had: Eve had no insecurities. She didn’t have to compete with the supermodels whose faces appeared on the newsstands or in the checkout line at the grocery store. She didn’t even have to lie awake at night wondering if she had married the right man! And yet, for all of that, she and Adam decided to sin. Here is the tragic story:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:1-5).

The serpent promised Adam and Eve that if they chose to be their own god, they could make independent decisions about right and wrong. The serpent was, in effect, saying to Eve, “*Feel*, don’t think. Don’t you see that the fruit is beautiful?” We know Adam was standing next to her, for when she offered the forbidden fruit to him, he also ate with her (verse 6). Quite possibly the first sin might have been Adam abdicating his responsibility as a husband; he didn’t stop his wife from disobeying God’s command. Instead, he actually participated with her.

The unintended consequences were not long in coming. They could not have predicted the fallout. God had said, “In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). Adam and

Eve had no experience of death, so they thought they could handle whatever consequences would ensue. Furthermore, if they didn't eat, they would always wonder what it would have been like; curiosity would have spawned the regret of not risking disobedience.

What the couple didn't know was that they had just toppled the first in a long line of dominoes that are still falling today. They could never have predicted that someday they would have a son by the name of Cain who would kill his brother, Abel. Evil would now enter the human race and zigzag throughout history, bringing destruction with it.

They couldn't predict the consequences of their sin, and neither can we predict the consequences of our own. Like a basketball we attempt to submerge in the ocean, we might think we have hidden our mess, but then it bobbles up somewhere else. The unintended consequences bedevil us!

The Entrance of Shame

Before they sinned, Adam and Eve didn't need the voice of conscience because they were without guilt. We read, "The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25).

But when sin entered into their lives, everything changed. Their conscience now condemned them.

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked?" (3:8-11).

Who told them that they were naked? No other human being was lurking in the shadows telling them that they had sinned. No

bird in a tree chirped the news. Their own awakened *conscience told them they had sinned and had reason to feel shame.*

Every human being would now have similar experiences. Many children would now be reared in a shame-based home: they would not only grow up feeling ashamed for their own sin but also be afflicted by the sin and shame of their parents.

I've titled the next chapter "It's Not All Your Fault" because we often inherit the shame or guilt of our parents. Poverty, alcoholism and addictions, brokenness, and abuse all impose shame on the life of a child. The implications can be devastating.

Adam and Eve's shame led them to hiding. They hid from God and from one another. They tried to manage their sin by putting their guilt into one compartment of their lives and use their minds to either justify their disobedience or suppress their persistent conscience. They now had a hidden life and a public life; the hidden life must not be seen by anyone lest their shame be revealed.

All of us have a private life we don't want others to see. I recall a statement made by the venerable J. Vernon McGee, speaking from the platform of The Moody Church during Moody Bible Institute's annual Bible Conference. He said in his gravelly voice, "If you knew my heart the way I know my heart, you wouldn't listen to me." Then he paused and said, "Now before you run to the exits, if I knew your heart the way you know your heart, I wouldn't even be talking to you."

The sin in the hidden part of our lives can grow to become an addiction, or even lead to criminal behavior. Here's a scenario that's happened many times: In compartment A, Mr. Smith is a Sunday school teacher. He is well thought of. He is respected in the community and in his church. But in compartment B, Mr. Smith is an abuser at home. He's an alcoholic. He's an addict. He has learned to manage his sin and put on a righteous façade. At all costs, his sin and shame must be hidden.

It's like men who want to erase everything from the hard drive of their computer so that they can present a clean image to others; they don't want anyone to see what they've been viewing. Shame must be covered.

My point is simply that the sin of Adam and Eve has affected all of us; we have all been born in sin (see Psalm 51:5). Only honesty before God, and often before others, clears our conscience.

More on that later.

Shame Leads to Blame

Adam played the “blame card” as soon as God confronted him. Adam was hiding, so God asked him: “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Genesis 3:11). He had a ready answer: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate.” It's the *woman's* fault!

Let me paraphrase Adam's response. “Lord, this is really *Your* fault! This weak-willed woman whom *You* gave me ate of the fruit and offered it to me. What was I to do? *She* is to blame.” Notice that Adam blamed his wife even though there wasn't a chance in the world that he had married the wrong woman!

Now it was Eve's turn to shift blame. “Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate’” (Genesis 3:13).

Someone has said, “So the man blamed the woman, the woman blamed the serpent—and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on!” As humorist Will Rogers said, “There are two eras in American history—the passing of the buffalo and the passing of the buck.”

History constantly repeats itself. As soon as sin is exposed, the blaming begins. “It's *his* fault.” “It's *her* fault.” “It's the *kid's* fault.” “It's *my employer's* fault.” People are going to defend themselves at

any cost. If need be, they will come to a confrontation with a pack of lies, ready to justify themselves.

In the novel *The Fall*, the famed French secular philosopher Albert Camus said, “Each of us insists on being innocent at all cost, even if he has to accuse the whole human race and heaven itself.”²

We will dig in our heels. If we need to lie, we’ll lie. If we can’t lie, we’ll tweak the truth. We’ll shift the blame because we have to hide our true selves from others, even from ourselves, and yes, even from God, if that were possible.

But the conscience does not forget, and it will not be silenced. Even when we think we have successfully suppressed it, it shows up at unexpected times.

No Return to Innocence

Innocence once lost cannot be regained. Adam and Eve were barred from returning to Eden. Nor can we return to the days of our innocence. A girl who has lost her virginity cannot get it back. A man who has abandoned his family and forced his children to grow up fatherless cannot undo his selfish choices. We can’t pray like the teenager, “Oh God, I pray that this accident might not have happened.” The past is past, there is no returning to Eden.

Everything changed for Adam and Eve. No sooner had they eaten the forbidden fruit than “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Genesis 3:7).

What Satan said was partially true. Their eyes were opened to the reality of their nakedness. So to cover their shame, they made a covering of fig leaves. Ever since, we have all sewn our own fig leaves to hide our true selves and cover our shame. We are thinking, *No one is ever going to see me as inadequate; no one will ever see me as I really am. No one will see my shame.*

For some, the fig leaves are quite literally beautiful clothes; for others, it's a beautiful body. For still others it's becoming a success in business, willing to trample on others to get where they want to go. So whether it's money, fame, sex, or a combination of all three, people have been willing to destroy their families, become deceptive, and in short, do whatever they think is needed to gain significance.

Meanwhile, behind the appearance of success is deep-seated inadequacy, shame, and a restless conscience. The fig leaves don't cover all the hidden parts. The empty rot within just won't go away. And yet the mask must be held firmly in place.

"Just worship me and we'll get along fine!" read the lettering on a T-shirt. But left to ourselves, we not only want worship, we want to outdo any rival gods. We have to look better than the person next to us.

When the fig leaves don't hide the inner despair and guilt, people turn to alcoholism, drugs, and sex. And in their disillusionment, they just might end up a victim of suicide.

God's Healing for a Damaged Conscience

Aren't you glad that Adam and Eve's story, and ours, doesn't end with fig leaves? God intervened on behalf of our first parents, and He intervenes for us as well.

God went looking for Adam and Eve. Notice that they weren't looking for Him. They weren't saying, "Where can we find God? Let's run to Him and see if we can restore our fellowship with Him."

No, they hid from God and so do we. The New Testament confirms that "no one seeks for God...not even one" (Romans 3:11-12). You say, "Well, I sought after God." But the reality is that God took the initiative and began a search for you and found you. He came looking for you. In John 15:16, Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

God came to the Garden with some clothes so that Adam and Eve didn't have to wrestle with guilt and haunting shame. "The LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them" (3:21). Where did God get the garments of skin? Obviously He killed some of the animals He had created. What God was saying right at the beginning was that *there is no cheap covering for sin*.

Our fig leaves might improve our appearance for others, but they don't hide us from God. But with God's wardrobe, we can live with a conscience that no longer condemns us. The blood that was shed to kill the animals that supplied clothes for Adam and Eve pointed forward to the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who shed His blood on our behalf. This is God's answer for our sin—and it isn't cheap. Our sin can be covered, but not by us.

As Adam and Eve discovered, the consequences of sin are messy, but our guilt is not the last word. Back when I was a boy, we spilled some oil on the concrete floor in our garage, and couldn't get rid of the stain. Therefore, if we wanted to do work on that concrete, we had to put a tarp over the mess. As far as we were concerned, the oil spill had never happened.

Beginning with this first blood sacrifice for sin in Genesis 3, God would go on to work more deeply in the human heart so that we would not just be legally forgiven, but our hearts would actually be cleansed. Sin wouldn't just be covered, but even better, it would be taken away.

And that leads to the topic of this book: *God is able to take our past and cover it, and then cleanse our conscience*. He has made it possible for us to not only be forgiven, but to approach Him with a clear conscience.

The accusations can stop. We can sleep at night when we're in fellowship with God, and to the extent possible, in fellowship with others. There's enough grace in God's heart for the sins of our past.

The Continuing Consequences

Yes, Adam and Eve's sin was forgiven. They were back in fellowship with God, but nothing was the same. Standing there with their new clothes, they might have had an argument:

Adam says, "Well, you did it first."

"Yeah, but you were standing next to me."

"Okay, sure I was standing there, but who actually took the first bite? Who's going to clean up this mess?"

"Don't look at me! Look at yourself, Adam. Didn't God say you're supposed to be the head of our home? He's going to hold you responsible. You were standing right beside me. Why didn't you say something?"

Eve is right; God does hold Adam responsible. But she can't escape responsibility either. There's plenty of blame to go around. We can imagine that the arguments continued when they were stuck with Cain, a problem child who killed Abel, his younger brother.

And so, very rapidly, the whole history of the human race fell apart as evil had its way. You and I today are caught in this same vortex of evil desires within us and temptations around us. We are born with a sin nature and come into this world under God's condemnation. We feel the sting of guilt for what we have done and for what we have not done. There is even the shame of what others have done to us.

God was gracious in preventing Adam and Eve from returning to Eden. If they had gone back and eaten of the fruit of the tree of life, they would have lived forever as sinners.

God had a better plan.

Jesus would be sent to fully redeem us: body, soul, and spirit. Sin would win many victories, but it would lose the war. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, we can be eternally forgiven in this life. Then at

death, our spirit will go to be with God, and at a later time, our bodies will be raised. An unimaginable heaven is being prepared for all who trust in God's Redeemer.

The issue before us is not the greatness of our sin—even if we think we have committed the greatest sin imaginable. “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). Grace is a game-changer. Sin loses its power in the presence of God's super-abounding grace.

Recently I read a remarkable book about a US Army chaplain named Henry Gerecke. He was a Lutheran pastor who joined the army during World War II. Because he spoke German, he found himself serving as chaplain to the cruel Nazi leaders who were on trial in Nuremberg, Germany, for their horrible war crimes. Incredibly, at least five of these men (and perhaps seven), most of whom were hanged for their crimes, came to saving faith in Jesus Christ as a result of the faithful witness of Chaplain Gerecke.³

Grace isn't fair! I thought as I read these stories of redemption. But the long arm of grace reaches out to people who clearly don't deserve it. It reaches out to those who deserve hell; it reaches out to all of us!

“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit” (Psalm 32:1-2).

Your conscience can be legally silenced. Let your invisible accuser drive you toward God and not away from Him. Let God find you.

Your past is not the final word.

A Passage to Ponder:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the man against whom the LORD
counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit
(Psalm 32:1-2).

Probing Questions to Consider:

Why do you think God allowed Adam and Eve the opportunity to sin? Think of decisions you have made that had unintended consequences. Were you able to enjoy God's forgiveness despite the fallout?

What fig leaves do we wear to cover our shame and guilt?

Pause to thank God for providing a permanent covering for our sin.