

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	107		Gary L.W. Johnson
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SHIPWRECKED FAITH

“A Christian teacher,” as Lock cryptically remarks, “must be a good soldier and a good sailor too.”¹ The Apostle has admonished young Timothy elsewhere to conduct himself as a good soldier (2 Timothy 2:3, 4). Now with the word shipwreck the military metaphor turns into a nautical one. We learn that the Apostle tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:25 that he had personally experienced being shipwrecked at sea on three different occasions, and in Acts 27:14-44 one of these is described in great detail.² Our passage (1 Timothy 1:18-19), speaks of a different kind of shipwreck that happens when people reject the guidance of conscience.

- I. **THE CONSCIENCE IN SCRIPTURE.** *The word conscience in the Greek New Testament.* As it turns out, “conscience is a Greek concept, with a few of its aspects expressed by that complex OT term *heart*. **Heart.** For the average inhabitant of the NT world, the idea of conscience was familiar – and distasteful. The Greek word for *conscience* is *syneidēsis*. Originally the word signified a look back into one’s past, an evaluation of remembered events in relationship to good and evil. To the Greeks, as reflected in their literature, conscience was usually a *bad conscience*, one that relentlessly plagued its owner by accusations about past failures. The noun *syneidēsis* occurs thirty-two times in the NT. The Bible shows how God deals with our bad consciences, and this revelation adds much to our understanding of human moral nature.”³ Note the following way this is used in the Bible.

A good conscience (1 Tim. 1:5, 19; 3:9); I have lived my life in all good conscience (Acts 23:1); I try to keep a clear conscience (Acts 24:16); I serve God with a clear conscience (2 Tim. 1:3); we are sure we have a good conscience (Heb. 13:18); keep a good conscience (1 Pet. 3:16); the spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord (Prov. 20:27).

Do not eat, for the sake of conscience (1 Cor. 10:28-9); be subject to rulers for conscience sake (Rom. 13:5); commending ourselves to every one’s conscience (2 Cor. 4:2).

The blood of Christ cleanses the conscience (Heb. 9:14); our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience (Heb. 10:22); an appeal to God for a good conscience (1 Pet. 3:21).

Gifts are offered which cannot perfect the conscience (Heb. 9:9). David’s heart smote him (1 Sam. 24:5); some eat food as offered to an idol and their weak conscience is defiled (1 Cor. 8:7); someone’s weak conscience may be emboldened to eat food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:10); by wounding their weak consciences you sin against Christ (1 Cor. 8:12).

Some have rejected conscience (1 Tim. 1:19) consciences seared as with an iron (1 Tim. 4:2); their minds and consciences are defiled (Titus 1:15).

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:9, 17; 3:3-7); the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil (Gen. 3:22); their conscience bearing witness (Rom. 2:15).

- II. **UNDERSTANDING OUR CONSCIENCE.** We are told in 1 Peter 3:16 that we need to keep a good conscience. The Apostle Paul informs us that there are Christians who have a weak conscience (Romans 14:23). What is this? MacArthur notes, “A weak conscience results from an immature or fragile faith not yet weaned from worldly influences and not yet saturated in the Word of God. Weak believers are to be accepted with love and not judged because their consciences are too tender. Paul instructed the Romans, *Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only* (Rom. 14:1-2. We see from Paul’s comment that the weak believer is likely to be overscrupulous, legalistic, troubled by his conscience in an unhealthy way. And as we shall note, a weak conscience is often the companion of legalism.”⁴
- III. **THE CONSCIENCE SHIPWRECKED.** “Now a good sailor does not *thrust away* or *discard* the rudder of the ship. The good conscience – one that obeys the dictates of the Word as applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit – is the rudder, guiding the believer’s vessel into the safe harbor of everlasting rest. But *certain individuals* (The Ephesian heretics; see on verse 3) have discarded that rudder. The inevitable result was that with reference to their *faith* – the truth which they had confessed with their lips; the name of Christ which they had named (see on 2 Tim. 2:17-19) – they *suffered shipwreck*. If even literal shipwreck is agonizing, as Paul had experienced (Acts 27:39-44; 2 Cor. 11:25), how much more to be feared is *religious shipwreck!*”⁵

CONCLUSION: Shakespeare famously declared “conscience doth make cowards of us all.”⁶ Calvin writes, “a bad conscience is the mother of all heresies, and today we see a vast number of men, who had never embraced the faith with honesty and sincerity, stampeded like brute beasts into the madness of the Epicureans, so that their hypocrisy is exposed. And not only so, but contempt for God is spreading everywhere and the licentious and depraved lives of almost all classes of men show that there is but the smallest portion of integrity left in the world, so that there is good reason to fear that the light which has been kindled may soon be put out, and God may leave a pure understanding of the Gospel to very few. The metaphor of a shipwreck is very apt, for it suggests that if we wish to reach port with our faith intact, we should make a good conscience the pilot of our course, or otherwise there is danger of shipwreck; faith may be sunk by a bad conscience as by a whirlpool in a stormy sea.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ As cited by D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1957), p. 68.

² cf. Sir Wm. Ramsay in his highly acclaimed work *St. Paul The Traveller and The Roman Citizen* (rpt. Baker, 1962). A more recent work, Robert Cornuke, *The Lost Shipwreck of Paul* (Global, 2003), provides very helpful background material.

³ L. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Zondervan, 1985), p. 185.

⁴ J. MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience* (Word, 1994), p. 44.

⁵ Wm. Hendriksen, *Exposition of Thessalonians and The Pastoral Epistles: New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1955), p. 86.

⁶ Hamlet, Act 3, scene 1.

⁷ *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 10, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 202.