

Salvation According to Scripture

Responding to the Gospel

Zion's Roar Holy Spirit Ministry
Bixby, Oklahoma



Book 2 - Chapter 02 – Study 05

A Good Conscience Toward God

Revised July 30, 2026

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Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version (KJV) of the Holy Bible.

Published by:
Zion's Roar Holy Spirit Ministry
Bixby, Oklahoma

For additional studies and biblical resources:

www.zionsroar.org

Email: www@zionsroar.org

Text: 918-814-1593

There are certain words in Scripture that most people rarely stop to examine because they seem so familiar. We hear them in sermons, read them in books, and use them in conversation without ever asking whether we understand them as God intended.

One of those words is conscience.

Most people would probably describe a good conscience as simply feeling innocent, doing what seems right, or living honestly according to their own convictions. Others believe that if they sincerely try to be a good person, they can rest peacefully knowing their conscience is clear.

But is that how Scripture defines a good conscience?

Can a person sincerely believe his conscience is clear while still lacking the good conscience God requires?

That question is far more important than it may first appear.

The New Testament repeatedly connects the conscience with faith, truth, obedience, holiness, and even salvation itself. It speaks of consciences that are good, pure, evil, weak, defiled, and even seared. Clearly, God does not view the conscience as merely a feeling. He treats it as something of great spiritual importance.

As I began studying this subject, another question immediately came to mind.

If every person possesses a conscience, why does Scripture place so much emphasis on having a good conscience?

Apparently, possessing a conscience and possessing a good conscience are not the same thing.

Rather than assuming we already know the answer, let us examine the Scriptures carefully and allow God to define what a good conscience truly is.

A Good Conscience Toward God

There are certain phrases that we hear so often that we eventually stop asking what they actually mean. One of those phrases is, "I have a clear conscience." I have heard people use those words for years. Some say it because they believe they have done nothing wrong. Others say it because they have admitted their mistakes and apologized. Some simply mean that they feel at peace with the decisions they have made. But the more I heard that phrase, the more I realized something. Everyone seemed to have a different definition of what a good conscience actually was.

That led me to ask myself a question that I had never seriously considered before. What is a good conscience according to God? Not according to me. Not according to my feelings. Not according to the way I was raised. According to God.

The question may sound simple, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized I did not have a biblical answer. I knew what I believed a good conscience was, but I could not point to the Scriptures and say, "This is how God defines it."

That bothered me more than I expected. If Peter speaks about a good conscience toward God, then there must also be a conscience that is not good toward God. Otherwise, why make the distinction?

Was a good conscience simply the absence of guilt?

Was it trying to live an honest life?

Was it doing the best we can?

Or was God describing something entirely different?

Rather than continue guessing, I decided to do what the Bereans do. I set aside what I heard and thought I knew and began searching the Scriptures, allowing God to define the subject for Himself. As I worked through each passage, I discovered that the Bible speaks about the conscience far more than I had realized. It speaks about good consciences, pure consciences, evil consciences, weak consciences, and even consciences that have

become seared. That alone should tell us that not every conscience is acceptable before God.

So where do we begin?
Where does God first begin explaining the conscience?

Surprisingly, He does not begin with us. He begins with Christ.

Christ and the Conscience

The first passage I came across immediately challenged the way I had always thought about the conscience.

If you asked most people how to obtain a clear conscience, you would probably receive many different answers. Some would say by doing good. Others would say by making things right with those they have hurt. Some might say by asking God for forgiveness, while others would simply say, "Follow your heart."

But when I opened the Scriptures, none of those were the first answer God gave.

Hebrews 9:14 (KJV) *How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*

That verse immediately answered one question for me.

A good conscience does not begin with me.

It begins with Christ.

Notice what the writer says. He does not say that our conscience is cleansed by trying harder, becoming more religious, or simply feeling sorry for our sins. He points directly to the blood of Christ.

As I thought about that verse, another question came to mind.

If the blood of Christ purges the conscience, why did the writer of Hebrews even need to say that?

What was wrong with everything that came before Christ?

After all, Israel had sacrifices. They had priests. They had the temple. They had everything God had commanded under the Law.

So why wasn't that enough?

The answer was only a few verses earlier.

Could the Law Perfect the Conscience?

I turned back a few verses to see what the writer had already said.

If Christ came to purge the conscience, then what was lacking under the Law? Was something missing, or was God accomplishing something different?

Hebrews 9:9 (KJV) *Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience;*

That verse answered my question almost immediately.

The sacrifices were never intended to make the conscience perfect.

That does not mean the sacrifices were wrong. God Himself commanded them. But they pointed forward to something greater. They were temporary. They were a shadow. They prepared God's people for the One who would accomplish what those sacrifices never could.

Now ***Hebrews 9:14*** made much more sense to me. Christ was not continuing the work of the sacrifices. He was accomplishing what they could never accomplish.

But another question came to mind.

If Christ has provided what the Law could never provide, why do the apostles continue telling Christians to maintain a good conscience?

If Christ purges the conscience, is there still something expected from us?

Why Does God Care About the Conscience?

The New Testament does not mention the conscience only once or twice. It speaks about it repeatedly. That alone tells me this is not some minor subject buried in the pages of Scripture. If God mentions something over and over again, then perhaps He is trying to draw our attention to it.

The first passage that helped me understand God's purpose was written by Paul to Timothy.

1 Timothy 1:5 (KJV) *Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned:*

I found that verse interesting because Paul was not speaking about the beginning of the commandment, but its end. In other words, he was describing what God's instruction was intended to produce in the believer.

Notice what is included in that list:

- A pure heart.
- A good conscience.
- And genuine faith.

None of those are presented as optional. They are all part of what God is working toward in the life of His people.

If a good conscience is one of God's goals for the believer, then I should probably stop treating it like a passing thought. It is not simply about whether I feel guilty or innocent. It is something God Himself desires His people to possess.

So now I have more questions:

If God desires every believer to have a good conscience, how do we know whether our conscience is actually good?

Can we simply decide that for ourselves?

Or does Scripture give us a way to examine it?

Can We Trust Our Own Conscience?

If God desires His people to have a good conscience, how do I know mine is actually good?

Most people believe they have a good conscience. In fact, I have rarely met anyone who openly admits they don't. Yet sincerity has never been God's measuring stick for truth. A person can sincerely believe he is right and still be completely wrong.

Saul of Tarsus is a good example. Before Christ confronted him on the road to Damascus, Saul truly believed he was serving God. He persecuted Christians, approved of their imprisonment, and even consented to their deaths. He was not pretending. He was convinced he was doing God's will.

Yet later, after coming to Christ, listen to what Paul says.

Acts 23:1 (KJV) *And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.*

Paul says he had lived in all good conscience before God. Yet we know there was a time when he was persecuting the church. Was Paul saying his persecution was acceptable before God? Of course not.

So, what was he saying?

He was saying he had acted according to what he honestly believed was right until God revealed the truth to him. Once the truth was revealed, he could no longer continue in ignorance.

I believe that is an important lesson for all of us.

A conscience may be sincere, but sincerity alone does not make it correct. A good conscience must be shaped by truth. If it is built upon error, then correcting the error becomes just as important as correcting the actions that follow.

That thought made me look for something else.

Does Scripture ever tell us how a conscience becomes good before God?

The Answer of a Good Conscience Toward God

By this point, we have already established several important truths from the Scriptures. We have seen that Christ purges the conscience. We have seen that the sacrifices under the Law could never make the conscience perfect. We have also seen that God desires His people to have a good conscience. The only thing we have not yet answered is when a person receives that good conscience toward God.

As we continued searching the Scriptures, one passage brought everything we had learned together.

1 Peter 3:21 (KJV) *The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:*

This is the first passage we have found that answers our question directly.

Notice that Peter first tells us what baptism is not. It is "*not the putting away of the filth of the flesh.*" He is not speaking about washing dirt from the body.

He then tells us what baptism is.

It is *"the answer of a good conscience toward God."*

At this point, we should stop and consider what Peter has just said. Throughout our study we have been searching for where God gives a person a good conscience toward Him. Up to this point, we have found no passage that places it anywhere else.

Peter places it at baptism.

Peter's words are difficult to ignore. He did not say baptism is **an answer** of a good conscience toward God. He said **it is the answer** of a good conscience toward God. That alone should cause us to slow down. Throughout this study we have searched the Scriptures to see where God gives a person a good conscience toward Him. We have seen that Christ purges the conscience. We have seen that the sacrifices under the Law could never perfect it. We have seen that God desires His people to have a good conscience. Now Peter tells us where that answer is found.

If Peter is correct, then this is not a small detail hidden within the New Testament. It becomes part of God's revealed pattern of salvation. We cannot simply read over those words because they challenge many of the assumptions people have about when a person receives a good conscience before God.

At this point, someone might ask, "Doesn't Hebrews say that Christ purges our conscience?" That is exactly the question we should ask. We should never ignore one passage in order to defend another. If Hebrews says Christ purges the conscience, and Peter says baptism is the answer of a good conscience toward God, then the two passages must agree. Scripture does not contradict itself. Rather than choosing one over the other, let us continue reading and allow the Scriptures to explain themselves.

Hebrews 10:22 (KJV) *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.*

As we read this verse, something else began coming together. Notice that the writer does not separate the conscience from the washing. In the same verse, he speaks about our hearts being sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies being washed with pure water.

Then another phrase stood out.

"...in full assurance of faith..."

That should sound familiar.

Throughout our previous studies, we have been following God's pattern of salvation one step at a time. We have already learned that faith is not merely believing something to be true. We also learned that the end of faith is the salvation of the soul and that Scripture speaks about a full assurance of faith.

Now Hebrews places that full assurance together with a cleansed conscience and the washing of the body.

When we place Hebrews beside Peter, they are no longer difficult to understand. Peter tells us that baptism is the answer of a good conscience toward God. Hebrews speaks about a conscience cleansed from evil while the body is washed with pure water. Rather than contradicting one another, both passages point us to the same moment.

At this point, we should pause and ask ourselves an honest question. If baptism is only an outward expression of an inward faith, why do these passages speak about it the way they do?

Hebrews does not describe it as merely symbolic. Peter does not describe it as merely symbolic. In fact, Peter goes out of his way to

explain that he is not speaking about washing dirt from the body. If baptism were nothing more than an outward symbol, why would Peter feel the need to make that distinction?

The more we compare these passages, the more difficult it becomes to describe baptism as something that simply represents a previous event. Christ purges the conscience. The sacrifices under the Law could never perfect the conscience. Peter tells us that baptism is the answer of a good conscience toward God. Hebrews places the cleansing of the conscience alongside the washing of the body. These passages are not competing with one another; together they present a consistent picture.

Notice what the discussion has never been about. The question has never been who has the power to cleanse the conscience. Christ alone accomplishes that through His sacrifice. The question has always been when and where God applies what Christ accomplished. Up to this point in our study, we have found only one passage that answers that question directly. Peter places the answer of a good conscience toward God at baptism.

Since that is where God gives a person a good conscience toward Him, then we should not move past those words too quickly. This is no longer simply a discussion about baptism. It is a discussion about whether we have received something God Himself says we need.

That leaves us with a question every one of us should answer honestly.

If God has appointed baptism as the answer of a good conscience toward Him, can we expect to stand before Him with that good conscience while knowingly rejecting the very place He says it is found?

Maintaining a Good Conscience

As we continued studying this subject, another important truth became clear. Peter speaks about the answer of a good conscience toward God. He does not describe something that believers receive over and over again throughout their lives. Rather, he points to the moment God grants that good conscience through baptism.

After that moment, the emphasis of the New Testament changes. The apostles no longer speak about seeking a good conscience. They speak about keeping one.

Paul understood this well.

Acts 24:16 (KJV) *And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.*

Notice that Paul does not speak about receiving another good conscience. He speaks about exercising himself to keep it void of offence. That is the responsibility of every believer. God grants us a good conscience according to His appointed pattern, but we are responsible for walking faithfully before Him so that our conscience remains pure.

This helps explain why the New Testament repeatedly encourages believers to guard their conscience rather than seek another one. Just as Christ died once for our sins, and just as we are baptized once for the remission of sins, we receive that good conscience once. From that point forward, we are called to live in a manner worthy of what God has already given us.

What Have We Learned?

As we come to the end of this study, let us take a moment to consider what the Scriptures have shown us.

We have learned that the sacrifices under the Law could never make the conscience perfect. We have learned that Christ alone is able to purge the conscience from dead works. We have also seen that God desires His people to have a good conscience and that Peter identifies baptism as the answer of a good conscience toward God. Finally, we saw that the apostles encouraged believers to maintain that good conscience by continuing to walk faithfully before God.

If we have followed these passages honestly, then one conclusion becomes difficult to avoid. A good conscience is not something we create by trying harder, nor is it something we simply declare ourselves to have. It is something God provides according to His revealed pattern.

This leaves us with one final question.

Have we followed that pattern?

Rather than answering that question with our opinions, let us compare everything we have learned to the salvation of John Doe and see whether anything is still missing.

Let us now compare it to John Doe and see how his salvation looks!

All we are looking for is to see whether he is going to be short of salvation or not. This is what we have so far for John Doe. Check only the ones that you can verify with Scripture as we go. Bring your check marks over from the previous studies and add any that he might have missed.

- ✓ He believes Christ is the Son of God.
- ✓ He believes Christ died for all our past sins.
- ✓ He believes Christ resurrected three days later.
- ✓ He believes Christ is sitting at the right hand of the Father interceding for us.
- ✓ He confessed Christ as Lord and Savior. (Through the sinner's prayer.)
- ✓ He confessed himself to be a sinner. (Through the sinner's prayer.)
- ✓ He repented of his sins. (For the sake of this study, let us assume his repentance was genuine.)
- ✓ He asked God for forgiveness. (Through the sinner's prayer.)
- ✓ He called upon the Lord to come into his life. (Through the sinner's prayer.)
- ✓ He was baptized as a baby by sprinkling.

X No full assurance of faith. Baptism is connected to the full assurance of faith. ***Hebrews 10:22***

X Did not complete faith. Since baptism is connected to the full assurance of faith, John Doe's faith remains incomplete. ***Hebrews 10:22; 1 Peter 1:9***

X No sanctification. We are sanctified by faith, and faith has not reached its full assurance. ***Acts 26:18; Hebrews 10:22***

X No saving grace. We are saved by grace through faith. If faith has not reached its full assurance, this remains unverified.

Ephesians 2:8; Hebrews 10:22

X No biblical confession. Scripture connects the confession of sins with baptism, not with a sinner's prayer. ***Matthew 3:6; Mark 1:5***

X No good conscience toward God. Peter identifies baptism as the answer of a good conscience toward God. ***1 Peter 3:21***

These are the things that are still questionable in John Doe's walk. You must decide whether they have been fulfilled from the Scriptures.

☐ He believes Jesus is the only begotten Son of God. ***John 3:18; Acts 8:37***

☐ He believes in both the Father and the Son. ***John 5:24; John 6:47***

☐ He believes that God the Father raised Christ from the dead. ***Romans 10:9; 1 Thessalonians 4:14***

☐ He has received the promise of salvation for remaining obedient until the end. ***Ephesians 1:13-14; Ephesians 4:30***

☐ He has received the remission of sins through baptism. ***Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16***

☐ He has received the gift of the Holy Ghost. ***Acts 2:38***

☐ Hands have been laid upon him for the Holy Ghost. ***Acts 8:17; Acts 19:6***

This opens more questions.

Is baptism necessary for salvation?

Is repentance simply a change of mind, or something deeper?

If baptism is necessary, must it be with water?

Is baptism merely an outward expression of faith, or does God accomplish something through it?

Does baptism have to be performed according to the biblical pattern?

Are works needed to demonstrate genuine repentance?

Are works necessary for salvation?

What does it mean to be converted? ***Acts 3:19***

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we conclude this study, it may be helpful to reflect upon what we have actually learned.

Throughout this examination, we have seen that the sacrifices under the Law could never make the conscience perfect. We have also seen that Christ alone is able to purge the conscience from dead works so that we may serve the living God. A good conscience, therefore, is not something we create by our own efforts, but something that God Himself provides through the work of Christ.

As we continued searching the Scriptures, we discovered that Peter identifies baptism as the answer of a good conscience toward God. Rather than describing baptism as merely an outward expression of faith, Peter connects it with salvation and with the very thing we have been searching for throughout this study. Hebrews then confirms this pattern by speaking of a cleansed conscience together with the washing of the body in full assurance of faith.

When we return to John Doe, the conclusion is straightforward.

We have found evidence that he believed.

We have found evidence that he repented.

We have found evidence of God's patience, mercy, and continued invitation for him to obey.

Yet we have not found sufficient evidence to conclude that John Doe ever received the good conscience toward God that Peter describes. According to the pattern we have examined, that answer is found in baptism.

At this point in our investigation, this requirement remains unfulfilled.

Therefore, John Doe remains unsaved.

The studies that follow will continue examining the remaining requirements associated with salvation and whether John Doe ultimately fulfills them according to the Scriptures.

You Should Have Already Verified and Tested:

B2-C01-S07 - A Common Salvation Story Examined

B2-C01-S08 - Why Feelings Cannot Be Trusted for Salvation

B2-C01-S09 - When Doubt Is a Call to Examine, Not to Fear

B2-C01-S10 - Believing Nearer to Salvation, Not Saved

B2-C02-S01 - The Gospel of Christ and the Authority of His Name

B2-C02-S02 - Repentance: A Complete Change of Direction

B2-C02-S03 - Faith That Leads to Salvation

B2-C02-S04 - Grace and Mercy Within God's Conditions

B2-C02-S05 - Confessing Christ According to Scripture

You Are Here:

B2-C02-S06 - A Good Conscience Toward God

Your Next Study:

B2-C03-S01 - Remission of Sins When God Erases the Past

And Then:

B2-C03-S02 - Baptism God's Appointed Moment of Remission

B2-C03-S04 - Answering the Objections to Baptism and Salvation

B2-C03-S05 - Examining Your Salvation According to Scripture

B2-C03-S06 - Conversion from Belief to a Changed Life

B2-C03-S07 - Enduring to the End Salvation Maintained by Faithfulness

B2-C03-S08 - Measuring What You Once Believed Against Scripture

Notes:

