

Three Questions

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Date: 22 June 2025

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[0 : 00] I don't know if you've ever faced an absolutely toxic situation where you're totally misrepresented and your conscience is clear and all seems terrible.

Jesus faced with the scribes and Pharisees. It was absolutely horrible. The Sadducees and Pharisees loathed Jesus with a very deep intensity.

His ministry and teaching and healing and relating to people was something that undermined their total fabric of aloofness and coldness to the people.

Jesus was a man of the people and he constituted something that they stood completely against. And of course he saw right through their hypocrisy. He saw through their self-indulgence. And he saw through their farcical keeping of the law.

It was like for Jesus, if that's not being irreverent, it was swimming in a sea of sharks. Perhaps some point in life you have had that feeling too that life is tough.

[1 : 36] Whatever way you've gone in life, whatever you've faced, remember Jesus has been before. So this was the primary element in the situation as Jesus faced with the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

Then the other more general element was nationally and internationally, it was a time of great uncertainty.

Things were reaching a climax. The oldest classical gods of the world of Greek and Rome, of Greece in particular, there was disillusionment about them.

They were totally aloof. They were fickle. They didn't really matter to people and they didn't care about people. There was the ever-never-changing, apparently never-changing dominance of the Roman Empire, crushing down on an unoccupied people.

That was a greatly oppressive feeling, although there were some good parts about it. And related to Rome, at that time, the people were facing the growth of emperor worship, which, when the church spread, was an absolute threat.

[3 : 01] The church couldn't be stopped, but Rome, with its emperor worship, was a threat. And many Christians suffered terrible ends because of emperor worship.

And at that time, too, around the time of Jesus, there was a growth of what were called mystery religions, mainly made up by people, pop-up gods who served some special emotion and gave satisfaction.

And it was all a load of nonsense, really. But people clung to them as they would cling to some certain marginal sects today. People were looking for hope.

And it was so much like the words of Augustine. They come to mind. You have made it for yourself, and our souls, our hearts are restless till they find rest in you.

People are looking. People were seeking. It was a time of tremendous uncertainty. And in this tense environment of Sadducees and Pharisees and a changing world, we've got these three questions.

[4 : 20] And although these situations were very undesirable that we've just read about, Jesus' responses to the first two questions do build in very clearly to the response to the ultimate question, what do you think about Christ?

So today, that's by way of background. So now we want to look at the parties concerned and their mindsets and their intentions, but especially remembering that the last question, the great question, what do you think of Christ?

It demanded at that time, and it still demands a response from both you and me today. So let's ask the question, what were the Sadducees?

The Old Testament witness, and even if you picked out the book of Psalms itself, you will show me the path of life before our faith and our joys forevermore, and so many references in the Psalms.

Despite that, with all their learning, they came to the conclusion, there's no hereafter, this life is the end, and that's it, they said.

[5 : 46] And they had a credibility because we all want an escape hatch, don't we? And if we say that life is the end, well, that is a sort of escape hatch.

But it was all an empty shell. Sadducees were described as being boorish, both to friends and strangers, and it's said that they made a virtue of argument, which is absolutely fascinating. Imagine making a virtue of having an argument with yourself, with people. But boorishness was a small thing compared to their view of life and its consequences.

So now we come to the first question, the question of the Sadducees. As we read that, I don't know how you reacted to this, but I said to myself, reading it and rereading it, it becomes all the more crazy, shall we say.

The Sadducees, there's no resurrection, they asked a question, teacher, and a man, a woman, seven husbands, imagine, and seven brothers. This is a nonsense scenario.

[7 : 05] It's almost funny if it wasn't so sad. But if the Sadducees were all that clever, how could they have set such a crazy scenario, which just did not fit reality at all?

It was an absurd situation. Married seven times to seven brothers, a nonsense scenario designed so clumsily to trip up Jesus.

And little did they expect a reply so comprehensive. What will it be like at the resurrection? What will happen?

Well, all their nonsense scenario was completely swept aside. And he gave four punchlines, shall we say.

He said, at the resurrection, there will be no weddings. Then he said, at the resurrection, there will be no angels.

[8 : 11] Now imagine an earthbound Sadducee, an agnostic you might say, almost. An earthbound Sadducee would be saying, there will be no angels.

And imagine how the people around Jesus at that time, oppressed by Rome, oppressed by Sadducees and Pharisees and all the islands were oppressed. And Jesus, this wonderful person, says at the resurrection, you'll be like angels.

That's hope in life. That's hope in life. And then, the third punchline, we've had the no weddings, the wonder of being like angels.

And then, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is the God of history. The God who is faithful, right down through history.

The God who led his people out of the wilderness. The God who gave water out of the rock. The God who gave manna. The God who planned their lives all the way through.

[9 : 19] Luke Sadducees, if you can't see the hand of God in this, well, where do you stand? What hope is there? And that's the answer that he got, and that they got, and it was absolutely amazing.

No weddings, the wonder of being like angels, the God of history. And then, of course, I am the God of the living. I'm the living God.

The God that goes with you. The God that supports you. The God of eternity. And what a reminder. The people were astonished at this teaching.

Could there have been a more striking contrast to the Sadducees and what they held on to? And in a few words, Jesus highlighted the implications of being a Sadducee.

He gave the four punch points. Now, what are the implications of being a Sadducee? Now, you may say, oh, what on earth are you doing just now?

[10 : 25] We're talking about something that is way remote from us. It's a very important lesson in this. Implications of being a Sadducee, and I don't know if there's some Sadducees here.

Perhaps I am at times. The most characteristic, biggest characteristic was a very pure view of life. Because if life, if death is the end, and man is made in the image of the eternal God, there's an intrinsic denial in that itself.

It's a poor view of life. And if death is the end, of course, people are undervalued. Life is cheap. And you deny the existence of the human soul.

They were prototype agnostics and atheists, these people. It's a poor view of life. And then, you go on to the next step. If you've got a pure view of life, you've got a poor view of human responsibility to one another.

Francis Schaeffer, whom some people struggle to read, including myself. I could only read a page at a time, but I remember one wonderful line from him in this respect about the poor view of human responsibility.

[11 : 40] If this life is all there is to it, what's the point in standing in the queue? And that bears tremendous weight.

If this is the end, if life is the end, why bother? Let me serve myself. I won't stand in the queue. Let me grab for myself.

So they had a poor view of life. They had a poor view of human responsibility. And then they had a very poor view of what could be got out of life.

They pursued pleasure in their own way. There was an 18th century poet rejoicing the name of Philip Doddridge. We're going to come back to him before we finish.

But he penned these two lines. Live while you live, the epicure will say, and give to pleasure every passing day. If life is, if you've got a poor view of life, well, let's live to our own ends.

[12 : 49] Let's live to pleasure. So that, in essence, these, in essence, were the consequences of being a sad story, a poor view of life, a poor view of human responsibility, and a poor view of what could be out of life.

I can't imagine anyone saying to them, oh, isn't it wonderful to be alive in God's world? earlier last week, I saw parts of the Highlands, and it was just absolutely wonderful.

And it was wonderful to be alive in that world. And one of the most wonderful things of discovering Christ is to be alive in his world and to see the beauty of his nature.

That's just one tiny bit of a great, immense benefit. But these poor souls had nothing like that. And as we think about, conclude a bit about the Pharisees, about the Sadducees, I can ask myself the question, am I standing here, perhaps, smuggling and saying, I could never be like a Sadducee. Could I ever be like a Sadducee? Then I really have to say to myself, how often have I put myself first? And that's what the Sadducees did.

[14 : 09] So that was the first question, a nonsense question, about a resurrection. And of course, these people are so crazy. They worded a thing about the resurrection in which they didn't believe.

That's the first question. So let's humbly say, although we look down on the Sadducees, I have put myself first at times.

Well, now we come on to the second question, the question by the Pharisees. First of all, the Pharisees, who were they?

By Jesus' time, they were not only a religious body, they were also a political body, and they were a force within the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedron.

And the common people found them loathsome, Christ found them troublesome beyond belief, and they were out of touch with the people because it was said that the Pharisees were so compliant that at one stage they sought to have direct rule from Rome rather than a slightly less malevolent political setup they have.

[15 : 24] They were totally out of touch with the people. In religious service, they were absolutely unbeatable. In contrast to the Sadducees, they did believe in the immortality of the soul, but it was more a sense of fate rather than a joyous looking forward for what God had prepared for those who loved him.

Out of the law given in the Old Testament, they had built sets of regulations to cover every situation, inferring that God's will for one's, God's will for one's not even mentioned in the Bible.

It's said that they ended up with 613 commandments, not 10, as given in the Bible, 613 commandments, and the interesting balance in this was that 248 of the commandments were positive, but if you add up the rest, 365 were negative.

Thou shalt not. But with all these regulations, of course, the chances of breaking the law were immeasurably increased. The Pharisees also had 39 regulations regarding the Sabbath, 39 prohibited acts on the Sabbath.

What a contrast to this is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it. And then they were said to have 31 customs which had been alleged from time immemorial.

[17 : 01] So it was a pretty comprehensive list of do-nots. Now we note from an inquisition immediately, in the passage immediately preceding the one we read, that they were trying to trap Jesus about paying taxes.

they knew but their knowledge was ignored by themselves and was totally unrelated to their conduct.

So the Pharisees who asked the second question, what is the greatest commandment in the law? They got a straight answer with love at its very heart.

There are two words in the New Testament for love. Phileo, I love in an affectionate sort of way. I love music, I love the scenery, I hold someone in mild affection. And then there's the other word, the other word agape, affection of the heart.

[18:13] Affection that involves passion, the affection that involves true, deep, abiding love. And which is used in this text?

Jesus uses the word agape, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. That's the one that was used.

Do I have a passionate love for Christ? And to the Pharisees, so is this an utterly alien concept. And Jesus stresses, all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.

Now that's interesting, a very interesting, very simple sentence. And what does it mean? It means it includes absolutely everything, all the law and the prophets.

Look, Pharisees, if you don't have agape love, if you don't have passionate love, if you don't have passionate love for the Lord and for your neighbour, your religion is absolutely useless.

[19:18] The response to Jesus' answer was not recorded. Probably they had no response. But you know this, it struck me very recently that looking down on these Pharisees, I shouldn't have looked down on all of them, but some did have that feeling of agape for Jesus.

I think it's absolutely wonderful to think that in that audience, that day was Nicodemus. How his heart must have leapt for joy when Jesus gave that answer.

Nicodemus who came tonight and acknowledged that Jesus was one sent from God. The Nicodemus who ran the risk taking Jesus' body down from the cross, love.

He had the passionate love. And he might well have been sitting in that audience today and his heart must have been leaping because of what Jesus said to his companions.

And to me, another thing that struck me was this. When I think of a situation in life that's absolutely toxic, that I'm getting absolutely nowhere, that I'm absolutely up against it, that the world is getting worse and worse and that in our country, those who want to deconstruct society seem so dominant, when the situation is toxic, remember that God is working.

[20:53] And that's a tremendous comfort. God is working with us today and in ways that I cannot see and I cannot imagine. So let's rejoice in this.

Calper said about rejoicing, about a Christian when he sings.

Sometimes the light arising as a Christian when he sings. It is the Lord arising with healing in his wings, you know. In the unexpected position, God is still working.

And even that grim scenario of questions I've been outlining, God is at working in at least one Pharisee. Now we've done two questions and now we come to the ultimate question, Jesus' question.

What do you think of Christ? In one sense the answer was tantalizing, but when you try to unpack this, it's fascinating what is said in Jesus' answer.

[22:06] I'll just say this in a few words. It spoke of divine sonship. It spoke of the divine succession through David.

He was part of that succession. It spoke of the work of the Spirit, and it spoke of the sovereignty of God. Now Jesus, into that short reply, packed all of that.

You can look at it later, perhaps. We could go on and on about this, but these four elements are clear. Divine sonship, divine succession through David, the work of the Spirit, and the sovereignty of God.

It didn't take it all in at once. I think it was designed to set them thinking about the real issues of life. It's designed to set them thinking about God's purposes, which had been absolutely obscured by their burdensome religion.

Their expectations were hollowed out. This was a Jesus of history, and this reply, this was a Jesus of history, and they had no reply. They were challenged by Jesus' ministry, hopefully some at a deep level, but many of them because they saw its impact on the people and felt undermined.

[23:21] If more and more were to follow this Jesus, their already lost cause would become a fiction. But their hostility had no place in God's economy.

And the true condemnation is recorded in the next chapter where Jesus speaks of the conduct of scribes and Pharisees. We're nearly finished.

So at this time, Jesus' ministry was reaching its climax in the despised death by crucifixion, in which the Pharisees played a keen role.

nothing could have been more remote from the Pharisees' mindset. Colossians chapter 2 was yet to be written, lest mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus who humbled himself and became a being even to death, even a death on a cross.

But one of the most wonderful things about that passage in Colossians was that it was written by a former Pharisee, Paul.

[24 : 27] So God was working there. How could they, you might ask? It was all willful blindness. They must have known the Old Testament prophecy. They must have known about its extraordinary birth, its refugee status, its return to grow up and teach and perform miracles, uplift the downcast to sheer honesty.

They must have known, but they shut their eyes to it. but he was still working. Finally, where do I stand? Am I willfully blind?

When I go on to this, look at this extraordinary person, the Lord Jesus, the foot washer, even the feet of Judas, the one who allowed a woman to wipe his feet with her hair, the most counter-cultural person that the world has ever known.

I cannot ignore the birth, the person, the work, the passion of Christ. This is no fiction. It's a living Jesus today working in the world.

No one could have thought this up. What do you think of Christ? Have I, like Paul, answered the question? He is my living Lord, my authentic, compassionate, understanding, I could go on, understanding, Lord.

[25 : 48] Is he my saviour? We are all challenged today to follow Jesus, perhaps for the first time, or well down the line, but let's, wherever we are, let's follow him, and you'll always have a sense of conflict, until you do.

Conflicted. I said I'd come back to Doddridge, 18th century, a bit old fashioned, but I can't find better words out with scripture to explain this. The tension being following Jesus and not.

Live while you live, the epicure would say, and seize the pleasures of the present day. Live while you live, the sacred preacher cries, and give to God each moment as it flies.

Live for yourself, or live for what the preacher says, live for Christ. Then Doddridge beautifully sums up what it means to be in Christ.

Lord, in my view, let both united be. I live in pressure when I live to thee.

[26 : 57] You see, there is no loss in following Christ, no loss of fun in life, no loss of fulfillment in life, but the wonderful opening of your eyes to God's creation, opening of your eyes to hope that will never die.

So no conflict. Lord, in my view, let both united be. I live in pleasure when I live to you. Well, where are we today? Are we on the run? As Francis Thompson said, lest having him I might have all beside.

Paul, once a Pharisee, could say, for me to live as Christ, there was no conflict, all gain, no loss. And we pray that for us too, as we seek to follow him, we will have that immeasurable sense of gain.