

## **“THAT OLD TIME RELIGION”**

### ***“Coping With Criticism”*** **Scripture Reading– Acts, 22:30–23:11**

---

*The next day, since the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them. Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, “My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day”.*

*At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!” Those who were standing near Paul said, “You dare to insult God’s high priest?” Paul replied, “Brothers, I did not realise that he was the high priest; for it is written: ‘Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people’”.*

*Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead”. When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.)*

*There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. “We find nothing wrong with this man”, they said. “What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.*

*The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome”.*

---

***‘You know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings, what kinds of things happened to me... yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.’***

***II Timothy, 3:10-12, NIV***

**This series, based on THE BOOK OF ACTS, is entitled ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’.**

The reason I want to call this series ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’ is that we need to look back in order that we might really look to the future. The OLD TIME RELIGION needs to become the NEW

TIME RELIGION because it is the ALL TIME RELIGION. If we get back to the basics of life in the Christian Church, we might better understand what the Holy Spirit can do through us today.

**THE BOOK OF ACTS is the story of success; the story of a church triumphant.**

It is the story of a small group of uncultured and generally unlearned people with meagre resources – very little money, no prestige, and no church buildings. This small group of people went out to tell the story of a publicly executed Jew. They went out against three obstacles – the imperial might of the Romans, the intellectual sophistication of the Greeks, and the religious bigotry of the Jews. They turned the world inside out and upside down for Jesus Christ.

*The Acts of the Apostles is the story of a church on fire with evangelism and growth...*

#### **“COPING WITH CRITICISM”**

**If we practice the old time religion, we will experience some old time persecution.**

We should not be surprised that when we stand up for Jesus, and stand out for the way we live our lives, it causes misunderstanding, criticism, and even physical persecution. The question is: How will you cope with such criticism? Will you have the peace of God in persecution? If you are not experiencing criticism or persecution, then it is not something to be proud of, it is something to worry about, because the Bible tells us we should expect to experience it.

***‘Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”.’***

***Matthew, 5:11-12, NIV***

***‘Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.’***

***II Timothy, 3:12, NIV***

**Do not confuse persecution with punishment.**

*Persecution happens when we suffer because bad people harm us for doing good.*

*Punishment happens when we suffer because good people harm us for doing bad.*

**These days, we can expect to be criticised for doing what is right.**

*A man was going home with his grandson and their donkey. The journey took him through five different villages. As they walked through the first village, there was criticism because neither the old man nor the young child had the sense for one of them to get on and ride, so the old man put the child on the donkey and walked along. As they walked through the second village, they heard criticism because the young healthy child should walk whilst the old man rode, so they switched places. As they walked through the third village the criticism was because the old man made the little boy walk, so they both got on the donkey. In the fourth village, the criticism was about animal abuse because it was unfair for the two of them to be riding the donkey. As they walked through the fifth village, the young boy was walking, the old man was walking, and they were both carrying the donkey!*

### **We skip forward in ACTS and find Paul in serious trouble in Jerusalem.**

After arriving and reporting in detail what God had done through his ministry to the Church, Paul was caught in the middle of a riot in the Temple. Whilst the Jews were attempting to kill him, the Roman military muscle rescued Paul. On hearing what all the trouble was about, the order was given for Paul to be flogged, but was rescinded when it became clear that he was a Roman citizen. Therefore, Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin Council to render verdict.

### **The Sanhedrin Council was a very powerful group of people.**

The High Court of Israel was made up of the seventy leading religious leaders and teachers of the day (not including Christians, of course). Paul used to be one of their number, but now he is considered a traitor. He stood before them knowing they once met together to decide that Jesus should be crucified. They once ordered that Stephen should be stoned. Now, they met together to decide the future of Paul.

*Think about this: Jesus had stood trial before the Sanhedrin, and so had Stephen; and now Paul witnessed to them. What great opportunities the Council had, but they would not believe!*

*Paul's example teaches us three important things about coping with criticism...*

## **1. A RIGHTEOUS LIFE**

*'Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day".'*

**Acts, 23:1, NIV**

### **'PAUL LOOKED STRAIGHT AT THE SANHEDRIN'.**

Paul was acutely aware that they held the power of life and death, yet he stood before them in peace. In Greek, the phrase 'ATENIZO ATENIZO' is used and is translated 'LOOKED STRAIGHT'. In one translation we read that Paul was 'EARNESTLY BEHOLDING'. Paul was not afraid. His head was not bowed down, he was not ashamed, not afraid, not about to back down. Paul stood before them cool, calm, and collected and looked them straight in their eyes.

### **Your conscience is an inner voice that accuses or excuses your actions.**

It is an internal sense of what is right and wrong that governs somebody's thoughts and actions, urging him or her to do right rather than wrong. Conscience may be compared to a window that lets in the light. God's Law is the light; and the cleaner the window is, the more the light shines in. As the window gets dirty, the light gets dimmer; and finally the light becomes darkness until it can no longer penetrate through the dirtiness.

### **Paul speaks about 'conscience' twice in Acts and twenty-one times in his letters.**

Conscience is the 'INNER JUDGE' or the 'INNER WITNESS' that approves when we do right and disapproves when we do wrong. Conscience does not set the standard; it only applies it. The conscience of a thief would bother him if he told the truth about his fellow crooks just as much as a Christian's conscience would convict him if he told a lie about his friends. Conscience does not make the standards; it applies them whether they are good or bad, right or wrong.

### **It was conscience that told Adam and Eve to hide after they disobeyed God.**

As the Lord customarily walked in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, Adam would have been his companion. Imagine the joy of walking through paradise with the Lord! However, after Adam and Eve sinned, it was their conscience that told them to hide. Conscience convicts.

### **Some folks are troubled by their conscience at church.**

You know who I mean! They get uncomfortable in worship. They are uncomfortable when you talk about Jesus and preach God's Word. They think that whatever and whenever the preacher says anything – it is directly related to them. Therefore, they do not enjoy church at all.

*Joyful, joyful, will the meeting be, when from sin our hearts are pure and free.*

*However, it can be dangerous to allow your conscience to be your only guide...*

### **OUR CONSCIENCE CAN BECOME CORRUPTED**

*'To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted.'*

**Titus, 1:15, NIV**

### **Your conscience can be compared to a sundial.**

You can shine a torch on a sundial and make it show any time that you want, provided that you shine it at the right angle. The reality is that sin can so corrupt the conscience that we begin to believe that any kind of behaviour is okay.

### **When Christians first sin, their conscience really bothers them.**

They confessed that sin and determined to do better, but the reality is that they soon fell back into the same sins. Eventually, if they keep on going like this long enough, they will get to the stage where their sin no longer bothers them. It does not bother them because their conscience has been corrupted.

### **OUR CONSCIENCE CAN BECOME SEARED**

*'Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.'*

**I Timothy, 4:2, NIV**

Searing a conscience is like branding animal flesh. In the procedure, the nerve endings die so that you could thrust a needle in the mark and the animal would feel nothing.

*There is an old American Indian proverb that likens conscience to having an arrowhead thrust inside the heart. Whenever you do something wrong, the arrowhead is turned and the sharp edges prick the heart. However, if you continue to do wrong and can ignore the hurt, the time will come when the sharp edges become smooth and you can no longer feel the turning of the arrowhead.*

*There is a story of the old prospector sleeping in his tent with his dog tied up outside. The dog barked so he shouted for the dog to be quiet. A little later, the dog barked again, so he got up went outside and kicked the dog. A little later, the dog barked again, so the prospector shot it dead and went back to sleep. He never woke up again as he was murdered by the very intruders the dog was warning him were coming.*

Many Christians kick their conscience to death and kill it, not realising that they are heading headlong for disaster. They do not know because they have broken the alarm.

## **OUR CONSCIENCE CAN BECOME EVIL**

*‘Let us go right into the presence of God, with true hearts fully trusting him. For our evil consciences have been sprinkled with Christ’s blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.’*

**Hebrews, 10:22, NLT**

**An evil conscience looks at what is bad and proclaims it good.**

Yes, I know that we have a generation of youngsters who, if they really like something and think it is good, call it “WICKED!”, but the writer of Hebrews was going far beyond that. Some people get to the stage when they can no longer tell right from wrong. Their minds are so defiled and deadened; they are twisted and warped to the stage where they call good bad and bad good.

**None of these consciences will help you to cope with criticism.**

*‘Paul said, “I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man”.’*  
**Acts, 24:16, NIV**

<b>YOU CAN COPE WITH CRITICISM ONLY WHEN YOU ARE MORALLY CLEAN AND LIVE A RIGHTEOUS LIFE</b>
--

## **2. A RESURRECTED LORD**

*‘Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead”.’*

**Acts, 23:6, NIV**

**Paul made a claim that he knew would split the Sanhedrin apart.**

In the Sanhedrin there were Pharisees and Sadducees whose beliefs were often opposed. The Pharisees believed in the minutiae of the Oral Law; the Sadducees accepted only the Written Law. The Pharisees believed in Predestination; the Sadducees believed in Free-will. The Pharisees believed in Angels and Spirits; the Sadducees did not. Above all, the Pharisees believed in the Resurrection of the Dead; the Sadducees did not. Paul claimed to be a Pharisee and that it was for the hope of Resurrection from the Dead he was on trial. As a result the Sanhedrin was split in two; and in the violent argument that followed Paul was nearly torn in pieces. To save him from violence the commander had to take him back to the barracks!

## **A TRUTH THAT DISTURBS**

**Paul asked the Sanhedrin to deal with the most important of facts.**

If Jesus had walked alive out of the grave, then he had power over death – this was a truth that could not be ignored; it could not be glossed over, it had to be faced. Of course, if Christ was still in the grave then Christianity does not really matter. But if he is not in the grave, then nothing else matters.

**There are only four opinions that you can have about Jesus Christ.**

HE WAS A LEGEND *A myth passed down through the years. There was simply too much evidence Jesus lived. The Council voted for Jesus to be crucified.*

HE WAS A LUNATIC *They were under the belief that he had been raised from the dead. He claimed to be God because he was a crazy religious nutcase. Perhaps he was deluded in his thinking that he was God.*

HE WAS A LIAR *He claimed to be God, but he knew he was not. He was lying when he claimed to be the only way to the Father. Everyone else may have accepted that he was a good man, but Jesus made deceitful claims about his person and work.*

HE IS THE LORD *Everything that he said and did was absolutely true.*

*‘For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.’*

**1 Corinthians, 15:16-20, NIV**

## **A TRUTH THAT DIVIDES**

*‘When Paul said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided... There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously... The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them.’*

**Acts, 23:7, 9a, 10a, NIV**

**The Pharisees and Sadducees were strange bed-fellows.**

Although they had diametrically opposing views, they met together with the sole aim of stopping Paul and shutting him up. We should not be surprised by this. In many churches, there are those who do not usually talk to or associate with one another. They may call one another names, but they will meet together when they share a common enemy.

**Jesus did not come to blend everything together, he was not ecumenical.**

*“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-*

*in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household'. Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."*

**Matthew, 10:34-37, NIV**

### **A TRUTH THAT DELIVERS**

**'PAUL SAID, "I STAND ON TRIAL BECAUSE OF MY HOPE IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD".'**

Some members of the Sanhedrin vowed never to sleep again until they had managed to kill Paul, but Paul knew that the very thing that was the cause of his persecution was the cause of his peace. God is glorified when we choose him and cling to the truth, no matter what anyone else may say.

**You are not ready to live until you are no longer afraid to die.**

<b>YOU COPE WITH CRITICISM WHEN YOU ARE THEOLOGICALLY CLEAR AND KNOW A RESURRECTED LORD</b>
---

## **3. A REASSURING LIFT**

*'The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome".'*

**Acts, 23:11, NIV**

**Jesus is never more real to you than when you are suffering for him.**

If you are tempted to tell me that you do not feel him close to you, then I am tempted to tell you that if you stand up for him, then you will feel him very close to you. Paul wrote that we can share in 'THE FELLOWSHIP' – 'THE KOINONIA' – 'OF HIS SUFFERINGS' (see **Philippians, 3:10**).

### **JESUS REASSURES US BECAUSE HE IS THE SYMPATHISING CHRIST**

A few years earlier, Jesus was in the same city, standing before the same council, being tried, not because he had committed a crime, but because he had been doing good. Jesus was known as a blasphemer, troublemaker, and heretic. He had been there and done that! Our Saviour knows and understands what we are going through because he has already been there – and he is with us today.

### **JESUS REASSURES US BECAUSE HE IS THE SUSTAINING CHRIST**

*Steven Covey tells the story of a man getting on to a New York Subway train with his three rowdy children. He just sat there with his eyes closed and his arms folded whilst the children acted in a loud, annoying and obnoxious manner. Eventually, someone approached him and asked if he could deal with his children. He said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I did not even notice. We just left the hospital were their mother died an hour ago".*

Compassion begins when we start to think and understand what others are going through. We have a Saviour who does not just know what we are going through because he is Omniscient, but because he has gone through it too. He has got sustaining grace to help us through.

**Jesus came to Paul in his prison cell to encourage him.**

Remember when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace, Jesus did not get them out of trouble. Instead, he got in to trouble with them by stepping into the fiery furnace with them.

*'King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, O king". He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods".'*

**Daniel, 3:24-25, NIV**

### **A MESSAGE OF COURAGE**

**Jesus told Paul to 'TAKE COURAGE', to 'BE OF GOOD CHEER'.**

Jesus often spoke these words during his earthly ministry. He spoke them to the palsied man and to the woman who suffered with the blood haemorrhage. He shouted them to the disciples in the storm on the Sea of Galilee, and repeated them to his disciples in the Upper Room after his Resurrection. As God's people, we can always take courage in times of difficulty because the Lord is with us and will see us through.

### **A MESSAGE OF COMMENDATION**

**The Lord did not rebuke Paul for going to Jerusalem.**

Rather, he commended him for the witness he had given, even though that witness had not been received. When you read the account of Paul's days in Jerusalem, you get the impression that everything Paul did failed miserably. His attempt to win over the legalistic Jews only helped cause a riot in the temple, and his witness before the Sanhedrin left the council in confusion. But the Lord was pleased with Paul's testimony, and that is what really counts.

### **A MESSAGE OF CONFIDENCE**

**Jesus told Paul: 'YOU MUST ALSO TESTIFY IN ROME'.**

Paul would go to Rome after all. This had been Paul's desire for months, but the events in Jerusalem had made it look as though that desire would not be fulfilled. What encouragement this promise gave to Paul in the weeks that followed, difficult weeks when leaders lied about him, when fanatics tried to kill him, and when government officials ignored him. In all of this, the Lord was with him and fulfilling his perfect plan to get his faithful servant to Rome.

*'Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.'*

**Philippians, 1:6, NIV**

<b>YOU COPE WITH CRITICISM WHEN YOU ARE SPIRITUALLY CLOSE AND EXPERIENCE A REASSURING LIFT</b>
--