

Study Aids
Discussion items
For “What’s the Message?” Lessons

Lesson 89

Who were the Pharisees and the Saducees, and what were their positions?

Pharisees

The Pharisees were the spiritual successors to the Hasidim (The Pious Ones) who first appeared after Ezra as men dedicated to the study of God’s Law, and to explain its meaning to the people.

Characteristics:

- a. the name means “separated” or “separatist”
- b. insisted upon observance of the Law in every detail . . . conservative here
- c. believed in oral tradition (the Talmud) of “the fathers” and gave it equal rating with the Torah . . . here liberal with respect to the Saducees
- d. attempted to interpret the Law and adapt it to the new conditions of their day . . . progressive in this
- e. added new rites, rituals and special feast days to Temple worship
- f. concepts of angels, demons, and resurrection of the dead were more fully developed and expressed . . . progressive here
- g. Pharisees were primarily responsible for maintaining the synagogues and schools for new teachers of the Law – St. Paul studied in the school of the famous rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3, 5:34).

Summary:

Pharisees taught strict obedience of Law, but must be classified as the “progressive wing” of Judaism. On the other hand they were very conservative politically with respect to Antiochus and the Hellenistic movement. The Pharisees opposed any Jewish leadership that sought to accommodate or tolerate and Hellenistic activity.

Saducees

Neither a political party, a sect, or a school of philosophy, they had characteristics of all three. They were a small, select group composed primarily of the educated and wealthy upper class – the aristocracy, the leaders of the nation. Many were members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Judea. They were descendants in many cases of the hereditary priesthood that arose after Ezra and Nehemiah. They represented “the establishment.”

Characteristics:

- a. utterly conservative religiously – they rejected the oral tradition of the Pharisees, and all ideas of angels, demons, and resurrection
- b. more liberal than the Pharisees in secular matters . . . supported leaders and political moves that were Hellenistic . . . collaborated with the Syrian rule of Antiochus and his successors.

Summary:

Clearly, with these two groups, what one was for, the other opposed; and when one said “yes”, the other said “no.” Hopefully, this background will enable you to understand more fully what Jesus, and St. Paul, were up against in their dealings with and messages to these two groups of leaders.