

“The God of the Living”
Luke 20:27-44
October 16, 2011

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus didn't make any friends among the Jewish leaders when he drove out the traders in the temple (19:45-46). It was likely that a good bit of their income came from this merchandising of their religion, and the leaders who were threatened by Jesus' action wanted to put him to death. But they were thwarted by the simple fact that the people loved Jesus' teaching and **“were hanging on his words”** (19:48). So before they could realize their desire to get rid of Jesus, they would have to discredit him in the eyes of the people. Several delegations of leaders came to Jesus in an attempt to get him to say something that would get him in trouble. So one group asked him whether good Jews should pay taxes to Caesar or not, intending to place him in a no-win situation. If he answered that they should, he would lose popularity with the people. If he answered that they should not, he would possibly lose his life through what would be seen by the Romans as treasonous speech. Jesus answered so cleverly that everyone marveled at his answer and became silent.

In the passage before us today, the Sadducees take their shot at discrediting Jesus. They attempt to do so by making his belief in a future resurrection look silly. Since the people were so enthralled with his teaching, they must have reasoned that if they could demonstrate themselves to be intellectually superior to Jesus, then he would be discredited at the very level where he had seen such success. So the Sadducees trotted out this argument against the resurrection that they had undoubtedly used to great effect in the past. They used a technique called *reductio ad absurdum*, which is Latin for “reduction to the absurd.” In this technique, a debater takes a proposition from his opponent and seeks to discredit it by extending it to its logical but absurd conclusion. Parents use this from time to time. A child is denied permission by his mother to do something and replies, “But mom, everybody is doing it.” She replies, “If everyone jumped off a cliff, would you jump off a cliff?” That's the *reductio ad absurdum* argument, which disproves the central assertion of the child's argument that permission should be granted on the basis of its popularity by taking popularity to its natural conclusion.

The Sadducees are trying to counter the argument for a future resurrection in a similar way. Their argument is based on an Old Testament practice called the levirate marriage, in which a brother was required to marry his deceased brother's widow if she were childless. The first child born of this union was to be considered the child of his dead brother, not his own child. The Sadducees construct a scenario in which the second brother also dies before the woman gets pregnant, and it becomes the obligation of the third to marry her. She then

runs through the entire seven brothers of the family and is still childless. Thinking that they had laid an inescapable trap for Jesus, they asked the question, **“In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?”** They took the argument of those who believed in a resurrection to what they considered to be its inevitable, but absurd conclusion. If the resurrection is true, then what you would be left with in the resurrection is a polygamous situation of one woman with seven husbands. Since every Jew present would have regarded that as a ridiculous outcome, the Sadducees claimed that a bodily resurrection was obviously also ridiculous and impossible.

Jesus believed in the resurrection and had taught it. After healing a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, he said, **“Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of the life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment** (John 5:28-29). His defense of it now both instructs us about the future and gives us great joy as we look forward to that future.

I. The Resurrection State – No Marriage

Jesus begins his defense of resurrection by correcting the assumption of the Sadducees about marriage. They assumed that marriage would continue in the resurrected state just as it is in this life, and Jesus says that it won't. If there is no marriage in the age to come, then their whole argument is rendered invalid. We acknowledge this in the traditional wedding vows, where the bride and groom promise to be faithful to one another “til death do you part.” Death ends a marriage, not just for this life but for eternity.

Is this news of the end of marriage good news or bad news? For those with unhappy marriages, it will immediately be seen as good news. But what about those with happy marriages? What will your relationship with your earthly spouse be like in the resurrected state if you are not joined to him or her in marriage as we know it? Will it feel like an unwelcome restriction to be denied this relationship that has brought such joy to you? Jesus gives a reason for the ending of marriage that helps us answer this question. He says that marriage will end, **“for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection”** (v. 36). We don't become angels, but only like them in this aspect of immortality. How does our immortality answer the question of why marriage will end in the future age? Jesus is here addressing one of the chief purposes of marriage, that of having babies and raising children, and saying that this purpose will be rendered needless because our resurrected bodies will all be immortal. To state the obvious, if no one ever dies, then the need for having babies will end. The new earth will be full to capacity with those who love and worship God, and there will be no need to replenish their numbers because of death. I do note that

Jesus assumes what is widely challenged in our age—that a committed marriage is the proper environment for the bringing of children into the world.

So Jesus' argument is that marriage will cease to exist in the future age because its purpose will be unnecessary. But procreation is not the only biblical purpose of marriage. There are two other purposes of marriage given in the Bible. The first one stated is that of companionship, designed for emotional and sexual fulfillment, in order to relieve the problem of loneliness. When God created marriage he said, **"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him"** (Gen. 2:18). The good news is that this purpose of marriage will be just as unnecessary as that of procreation, because its purpose of companionship will be fulfilled in the perfect community of the future state. There will be no loneliness there. The third purpose of marriage, according to Paul in Ephesians 5, is to serve as a picture for Jesus' love for the Church. But that purpose too will be unnecessary in the resurrection age because of the reality of Jesus' immediate presence. This contrast between picture and reality is very helpful in this regard. If you have to be separated from a loved one for a time, it is nice to have a picture of them. But when that loved one returns, no one would prefer the picture to the presence of the person. Marriage is the picture, and when we enjoy the immediate presence of Jesus in the resurrection state, marriage will no longer be necessary.

Before moving on, let me mention two applications. First, since the institution of marriage is temporary, we must resist the temptation to elevate it too highly. A young teenager once said to me that he didn't want Jesus to return before he could get married and have a family. Trust me, when Jesus returns and gives us a place to live with him on the new earth forever, you won't miss marriage, any more than I miss a picture of my wife when I have my wife with me. A second application is for single people to take comfort from knowing that any loneliness caused by your singleness is temporary. It will end forever in the resurrection state of the future age.

II. The Resurrection God – A God of Life and Liberation

Not only do the Sadducees not understand the nature of marriage, they also misunderstand the nature of God. Jesus' second argument against the Sadducees reaches back to a passage in Exodus 3, when God spoke to Moses at the burning bush. He could have used a much clearer Old Testament passage to support the resurrection. Daniel 12:2 says, **"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."** But the Sadducees only received the first five books of the Old Testament, so Jesus reached back to Exodus to make his argument.

Jesus makes two points from Exodus 3. First, the fact of life after death is demonstrated in the title God gives to himself when he speaks to Moses. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. His point is spelled out in verse 38: **“Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.”** These patriarchs had been dead for several hundred years by the time God speaks to Moses. But since he is the God of the living, there was a sense in which they were alive at the time God was speaking to Moses. The Sadducees not only denied the resurrection of the body, they were the materialists of their age and denied any afterlife, bodily or otherwise. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had not been raised bodily yet, and still haven’t for that matter. But they are very much alive in what theologians term the intermediate state, that time between the death of the body and the future resurrection of the body. Jesus didn’t believe that this intermediate state was a soul sleep, but one of communion between the living God and his people. John Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, says this verse means “that believers, after they have died in this world, lead a heavenly life with God... God is faithful to preserve them alive in his presence, beyond the comprehension of men.”

But there is more here. The context of this quote from Exodus 3 is the exodus of Israel from Egypt. What this means is that Jesus sees bodily resurrection as the ultimate fulfillment of the exodus. It is our final liberation from sin and its oppressive results. The intermediate state when our bodies die and we go to heaven as disembodied spirits is better by far than life on this earth, because we will be with Jesus and our struggle against sin will be over. But our liberation is not fully realized until our bodies are raised as material things that can be touched. That’s why Paul describes the intermediate state prior to the resurrection as being naked, a state in which we groan because we long **“to put on our heavenly dwelling”** (2 Cor. 5:2-3).

III. The Resurrection Jesus – The Last One Standing

The final verse of our passage is easily passed over, but full of significance. **“For they no longer dared to ask him any question”** (v. 40). All of these opponents had come forward in an attempt to trick Jesus or silence him in some way. This last group attempted to make him look silly with his belief in a bodily resurrection. But after everything is said and done, they look silly and Jesus is the only one still standing.

It is not only the case in these incidents that Jesus has silenced all his enemies, but it will be the same at the end of this world. Many have arisen to speak against him, but at the end of the day they will all be made to look rather silly. Have you noticed how some things that seemed so fashionable and fascinating in the past look silly from the perspective of a few decades later? I was a teenager in the 70’s. I once had a pair of platform shoes. For those of you who weren’t alive then, they were men’s shoes with big, clunky high heels, and

usually made of shiny patent leather. I can also remember double knit polyester leisure suits, wide ties and hideously colored and patterned fabric. If I were to flash on the wall behind me a big picture of myself as a teenager wearing such cartoonish clothes, we would all have a big laugh. What was once considered fashionable is revealed now to be silly and ridiculous.

Many enemies of Jesus come forward today to try to make him look silly. There are the materialists, who think it is a colossal waste to forsake everything in order to follow Jesus. They say that this world is all there is, and the hope of heaven is only a fiction we tell ourselves so that we don't feel so bad. But at the end of all things, their valuing of material things will be exposed as foolish, and all who have stood with Jesus will be glad they did. There are the religious pluralists, who say that we Christians who insist that Jesus is the only way to the Father are so narrow-minded. They will be silenced one day when Jesus is revealed, in fact, as the only way to the Father. There are those who seek earthly power, thinking that if they can control their world and shape it as they desire, then all will be well. They despise the invitation of Jesus to give up power and trust in him instead. But at the end of the day, their seeking of power will have bought them nothing but trouble, while those who have rested in Jesus will be full of joy.

The application is obvious. If Jesus is the one left standing when all is said and done, I'm sticking with Jesus. If he said that the most important thing in life is to love God with all my heart, mind and strength, then I'm going to make it my goal to pursue God in that way. If he said that the second most important thing is to love my neighbor, then I'm going to structure my life in order to allow space to do so. If he said that the way to life is to lose my life and follow him, then I'm going to be suspicious of all my own conclusions about life and listen to Jesus.

Jesus' enemies were unable to discredit him through their words, so they will soon turn to something else. They will try to do so through a raw display of force, arresting him and trying him in a sham of a court and sentencing him to be executed. They think that in this way he will be silenced for all time, and they will be left standing. But once again they underestimate Jesus. Through his death, sin is defeated for all time. Further, Jesus was raised from the dead and promises resurrection for all his followers.

CONCLUSION:

What would it look like for you to stand with Jesus and follow him fully? I invite you to trust him today and follow him in everything. You will not regret doing so, because at the end of the day, he is the only one left standing. And all who have stood with him will also live with him forever.