

THE GOD OF THE LIVING

Mark 12:18-27

What do you think it would be like if you or I were to challenge Michael Jordan in a slam dunk contest? Or Tiger Woods in a round of golf? Or how about challenging Usain Bolt, the fastest man in the world, to a 100-meter dash? I can't imagine we would have any chances of winning because these guys are the best of the best in what they do. Partly because they're built for it and we're not. But that's a great picture for us today as our next challengers, the Sadducees, come to stump Jesus in a theological question about what happens after death. They're challenging God the Eternal Son to a theological debate about the afterlife!

And you know, there's a lot of weird ideas out there about what happens after someone dies and the Sadducees had one of them. The Sadducees thought they had it all figured out and they come to embarrass and humiliate Jesus but it's sort of like you or me against Michael Jordan in a game of 2 on 2 when Michael Jordan was at his best. Jesus corrects them and clarifies for us much of what afterlife is like. We're going to answer questions today like "What happens when we die? Is there marriage in heaven? Are we like angels? What about our bodies?" All good questions I'm excited to discuss with you today.

Mark 12:18-27

"Some Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Jesus, and began questioning Him, saying, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves behind a wife and leaves no child, his brother should marry the wife and raise up children to his brother. There were seven brothers; and the first took a wife, and died leaving no children. The second one married her, and died leaving behind no children; and the third likewise; and so all seven left no children. Last of all the woman died also. In the resurrection, when they rise again, which one's wife will she be? For all seven had married her.'"

Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But regarding the fact that the dead rise again, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; you are greatly mistaken."

So, coming back to chapter 12 this week, we find ourselves in the 3rd out of 5 questions being presented to Jesus to challenge Him. The first was about His authority, the second about taxes & government, and now a theological question about what happens after death in the afterlife. It's the third insincere question designed to trap or humiliate Jesus and comes from this specific group called the Sadducees.

I. THE SADDUCEES CONFRONT JESUS WITH A THEOLOGICAL QUESTION (VV. 18-23)

Jesus, we know, taught many things about the kingdom of God and of heaven as something eternal and other-worldly. He was one of them! He is not of this world. He also taught that there would be a resurrection of all men, that even though we die, our bodies will be resurrected and glorified.

The Sadducees we all know were "sad you see" because they didn't believe in the **resurrection**. Mark points that out in verse 18, they "*say there is no resurrection*". We could call them **annihilationists** who believed that the soul perished with the body when the body dies – that people cease to exist when they die. It's an attractive doctrine because it does away with eternal torment, but we know from many Bible passages that that's just not the case (Luke 16:19-31; Rev.

20). We'll look at that more later. But this is the only place Mark mentions this group of men who believed this. Typically set in contrast to the Pharisees' beliefs, these guys were **the anti-supernaturalists of Christ's day**, denying not only the truth of the bodily resurrection, but the miraculous, the spiritual world including the existence of angels, and future punishment or reward.ⁱ

You might recall one instance from Acts where Paul took advantage of the differences between Pharisees and Sadducees when he was in a tight spot before a crowd. Acts 23:6-8 capsulates what they believed, *"But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all."* Even though the Sadducees upheld the Law of Moses like the Pharisees, they were opposed to the Oral Law and traditions passed down by the Pharisees and the supernatural elements.

They saw themselves as the staunch conservatives among the Jews whose **doctrinal stance was derived solely from the Pentateuch**, the first five books of the Bible that are the writings of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). **You'll want to remember for the rest of the message what the Pentateuch is.** It was permissible for them to use other writings like the Prophets and Psalms to illustrate and support their doctrine, but every doctrine in their mind had to originate from Moses' authority.ⁱⁱ The Pharisees, however, believed doctrine could be derived from all parts of Scripture. But since, the Sadducees thought, they couldn't find sufficient evidence for the resurrection and afterlife in the Pentateuch (*which if we took the time to look over some proof texts, we would find is very absurd*) they said they didn't believe it. There are many, many proofs of resurrection and life beyond the grave throughout the OT, including Genesis (Gen. 5:24; Gen. 22:5 w/ Heb. 11:17-19; 2 Kings 2:11; Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:1-14; Dan. 12:2; Pss. 16:9-11; 49:15; 73:23-26; 139:8; Job 19:26).

But they basically believed in the here and now only. No life after. No rewards. No judgment. No sovereign God. No angels. It reminds me of the more recent motto "YOLO – You Only Live Once" It would have been a great slogan for the Sadducees who believed there was nothing beyond this material, temporal life. No hope, no everlasting meta-narrative story of God to live for, no purpose. It's really strange for one who believes in God and Jesus says they are very mistaken.

From historical documents we're able to glean that these guys were probably from upper-class, high-priestly, aristocratic families of Jerusalem. It seems, and the text supports this, they were rigid, wealthy, intellectual stiff necks. It appears they were interested in the priesthood, scrupulous in upholding the temple traditions and the sacrificial system.ⁱⁱⁱ But there weren't nearly as many Sadducees as there were Pharisees (*considering their doctrine, for good reason!*). In AD 70 when the Temple was destroyed, so did the records of them. They virtually disappear at that time.

Though they aren't revealed in the gospel records as having opposed Christ as frequently, they were still condemned by Him just as severely.^{iv} Jesus said to, *"Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees"* in Matthew 16:6. And I think we see why. They come to Jesus with a question but it's anything but sincere. They are not seeking truth. They just want their little religious sect to get the credit for defeating Jesus in a Scriptural debate. Apparently, they enjoyed this and thought it virtuous to attack people with theological arguments and win. Josephus wrote,

“The Sadducees... are, even among themselves, rather boorish in their behavior, and in their intercourse with their peers are as rude as aliens.”^v They evidently didn’t like people very much. They’re a great example of what not to be like as a Christian. For some Christians, it’s like they like to argue the gospel. As if they just want to prove themselves right. Like that quote from last week said, “*The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians.*”^{vi}

❖ **Christians are to defend the faith with gentleness & respect (1 Pet. 3:15; Prov. 3:3-4)**
Peter said to always be ready to defend the faith but with gentleness and reverence. John said speak the truth in love. Winsome people express a genuine concern for others’ well-being and are seeking their restoration to God (Gal. 6:1-5). Bind **truth** and **kindness** around your neck (Prov. 3:3-4).

Anyway, these Sadducees come to Jesus with what you could call a straw man argument. To make Jesus’ theological position look absurd and easy to attack, they come up with this hypothetical situation. The hypothetical situation is that of this woman of 7 husbands and no children before dying. I laughed out loud when one man said for her, after 7 husbands, death was a mercy! But the question is whose wife is she in the resurrection? But their story was probably hijacked from the Apocryphal book of Tobit, an old Jewish mythical writing. In the book of Tobit there is a woman who marries 7 husbands and each of them dies on their wedding night. To be honest, it sounds more like a Stephen King tale^{vii} or some episode of 20/20 (Tobit 3:8, esp. 15; 6:13-14; 7:11)! Like much of the apocryphal books, I mean it’s just strange. It’s an ancient Jewish writing but is not inspired. Sometimes I get asked why we don’t include the apocryphal books in our canon of Scripture. Well, have you ever read those things? If you know your Bible and then you read the apocryphal books, you’ll see why they aren’t part of Scripture! They’re not consistent with the Bible, have historical errors and just don’t bear the marks of inspiration.

But they take this unrealistic situation and plug it into the Law of Moses where if a brother died and left a wife with no children, his single remaining brother was to marry her and have a child that would assume the name of the deceased brother. It’s referred to as “*the law of levirate*” meaning “*husband’s brother.*” It’s something that was practiced even before the Law of Moses (Gen. 38:8-9) and instructed in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. To not fulfill this duty in Israel was a disgraceful thing leaving you with the name, ‘*The house of him whose sandal is removed*’ because they would take your sandal and spit in your face. If you don’t believe me, look it up! For those who think we’re still under the Law, they should try this one on for size, because if you’re going to live by the law, you have to live by all of it, James said (Jas. 2:10) – civil, moral and religious. The Law is an inseparable unit.

To understand why you have to think like an Israelite in the literal promised land where the Law was designed to insure continuation of the family name and inheritance within the tribes of Israel as something lasting. It kept the deceased brother’s name from being blotted out from Israel. It would keep the property of the dead brother within the family, which was a big thing for them. But let’s look at Jesus’ marvelous response.

II. **THE MARVELOUS RESPONSE OF JESUS. (VV. 24-27)**

I call His response marvelous because the people were mind-blown by it. In Luke 20:39 when He is finished, “*Some of the scribes answered and said, ‘Teacher, You have spoken well.’*” And Matthew 22:33 says, “*When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at His teaching.*” There’s some Christological significance there isn’t there? Jesus is the Master Teacher because He’s God.

You just don't want to challenge God Himself on what happens in the afterlife. First, in verse 24, "Jesus said to them, 'Is this not the reason you are greatly mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God?'" Jesus tells them plainly they're greatly mistaken. The word *planasthe* mean wandering, like a wandering star or planet. They're off course. That's his assessment of their theology, not understanding **the Scriptures** nor the **power of God**.

A. Jesus makes an appeal to the power of God. (v. 24)

The power of God is clearly in reference to His power to raise someone from the dead. How can someone who has been dead and buried for any length of time rise from the grave? Simple. **God is an all-powerful God!** There's nothing that's impossible for Him. If He could create everything we know in six days via *ex nihilo* (from no pre-existing material) and by *fiat* (simply by speaking), what's to stop Him from raising the dead to live on a New Heaven and New Earths someday? The first verse of the Pentateuch proves His power is not bound.

❖ **God's power is sufficient to raise the dead. (Gen. 1:1)**

In Jesus' response, that's just implied. It's a simple but great truth. I think we've heard that so long that it falls on deaf ears for us. **But think about it. Meditate on it. God has the power to do something no one else can. He can and will raise every person from the dead.** We will raise from the grave. At every graveside funeral service, that's the reminder. This is not the end but just the planting of a seed that will one day burst forth as a new body. Literal, physical bodies will be transformed, raised as new, glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15:35-58). Same body, just transformed. Earthly to heavenly. Perishable to imperishable. Mortal to immortal.

Jesus by now though, has already **demonstrated His resurrection power by His miracles:** raising the little girl, a little boy being carried to his grave, and His friend Lazarus whom He called out of the tomb. **He taught the resurrection.** John 5:25 says, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live*" ...some to a resurrection of life and some to resurrection of judgment. And this is something to get a handle on because it's the reality of biblical afterlife:

❖ **Every person will be resurrected – some to everlasting life and some to everlasting judgment and conscious torment.** (Jn. 5:25-29; Lk. 16:19-30; Rev. 20)

For the sake of time, I'm just speaking in general terms here, but Revelation 20 describes a **resurrection of life** for those who've trusted Jesus when He returns, then the 1,000-year Millennial reign, then a **resurrection of judgment** for "*the rest of the dead*", for unbelievers (Rev. 20:5) before He creates a New Heaven and New Earth and ushers in the eternal state of things. But those who were raised to judgment won't enjoy the New Earth because they will be tormented day and night forever and ever along with the devil who deceived them in the eternal lake of fire.

What about between now and then though? What about our loved ones who've died and are in heaven? What is like for them. Well, this is what is referred to as **the intermediary state, between death and resurrection.** And what happens is when the **material** part of us (the body) dies, the **immaterial** part of us (soul and spirit) separates (*death means separation; like Christ in 1 Peter 3:18 death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit*) and is immediately ushered into to heaven to meet God for a **judgment of faith.** It is appointed for man to die and after this face judgment (Heb. 9:27). If your faith was in Christ, you stay and enter paradise. If you rejected Christ in this life, you are sent to hades/hell, a place of temporary torment until the post-millennial resurrection and final judgment in the lake of fire (Luke 16:19-31).

For believers, this is our great hope! As soon as we die, we will be with God as soon as we die. God has some sort of heavenly form for us to assume until we are resurrected (2 Cor. 5:1-10). *“For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”* There’s no need to worry about intermediary state. Paul said to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23) and to depart is to be with Christ. So there’s **no such thing as “soul sleep” or ceasing to exist when you die.** You go to paradise in Heaven and one day, in the twinkling of an eye, we will be reunited with our transformed, glorified bodies by the power of God. And when we get there, we won’t worry about those in hell either. Randy Alcorn said, *“We’ll never question God’s justice, wondering how he could send good people to hell. Rather we’ll be overwhelmed with His grace, marveling at what He did to send bad people to Heaven.”*^{viii}

But Jesus not only taught the resurrection, He prophesied it and experienced it.

❖ **Jesus’ resurrection is the greatest proof of God’s power to raise the dead.**

He told the leaders in the Temple, *“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days.”* He wasn’t talking about the literal Temple but the temple of His body. They would destroy His temple, bury it, but 3 days later rose again. And that’s the message that if you believe you are saved by because it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

B. Jesus appeals to the inherent nature (essence) of resurrection life. (v. 25)

“For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage.” To grasp why He said this, you have to contrast it with what the current mainline Jewish belief of the Pharisees which taught that when the resurrection took place, they thought they’d all just pick up where they left off with their natural families. **They thought of it as a mere awakening to the natural life as it was before** but that’s not the case and was Jesus is saying. The idea was too earthly. Yes, our physical bodies are raised, but they are also glorified, being immortal. **With no death comes no need for reproduction, and thus, no need for marriage through which that would take place.** That’s a heavenly precept to take home because there’s a lot of confusion about that I find. When you marry, the vows are for life, “until death do us part” and not for eternity. Marriage in this life is really a picture of the intimacy that we long for with God. It’s the greatest picture of intimacy and intimacy that the soul longs for with its Creator.

❖ **Heavenly Precept: There is no marriage in heaven except our marriage as the Bride (the Church) to Jesus our Husband. (Rev. 19:1-10)**

You can read about that in Revelation 19:1-10, the marriage supper of the Lamb. So it’s not like the weird ideas the Mormons believe where they think the faithful ones who work really hard for their salvation (denying Christ) will become little gods procreating naturally with multiple wives on their own little planets^{ix} or like Muslims believe where if you commit Jihad you’ll have 72 virgins in heaven. Those are false ideas. There is no marriage in heaven but our marriage to Christ as our Husband. That’s **one of the seven figures of the Church – Christ is the Husband and we are His spotless Bride** redeemed by grace. In heaven, our relationships with God will be perfect and the central relationship. We will be perfect lovers of God.

Think of the **courage** and **fortitude** and **hope** Jesus’ words bring to those who in Mark’s original audience who might have lost loved ones to persecution. It’s not the end. It’s not the end. Resurrection is coming (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Paul said to be comforted by that reality. And be comforted by the fact that spouses who’ve died have been joined to their forever spouse, God, who satisfies completely. And one day, we will be too. One of the things this should

underscore for us is that the most important relationship we have in this life is an authentic and growing relationship with Christ.

❖ **The most important relationship in this life is an authentic and growing relationship with God through Christ.**

Some of you guys have lost loved one and you miss them dearly and want to see them again and be with them again. And you will! But it's not going to be the same. And if they could speak to you today, they would want you to **long for Jesus more** than them because they know fully, as perfect lovers of God in Heaven, that only Jesus can relieve you and free you and give you hope and life and companionship that you're really looking for even in this life, something they could never fully do when they were here. They would want you to be more excited about seeing Jesus and meeting Jesus than anyone else. And trust me, **the companionship that marriage brought in this life will be more than satisfied in Heaven and eternity**, getting to know all of our family (brothers and sisters) in Christ (Mark 3:35; 10:30) and being satisfied with God's presence. **Just because there's no marriage and sex does not mean there is the slightest reduction in love.** We will be truly lovers of God and each other, more capable of loving than ever before^x despite there being no marriage. I love my wife dearly but I can't wait!

Having studied the nature of the afterlife, you start to see why Jesus would say that in a sense we will be **more, "like the angels in heaven" than present day humans.** Every now and then you hear it said when someone dies, "*Heaven gained another angel.*" It sounds nice, but I would encourage you not to say that because it's theologically inaccurate and gives people a false idea that their loved ones have become their guardian angels. **We won't be angels, but be like them** in the fact that just like them, we worship and love and serve God perfectly and we don't procreate. Does being "like angels" mean we'll have wings or be sexless or lose our individuality and personalities? No. Even angels have individualities and are masculine and have unique design and roles in heaven.

❖ **When we see Him, we shall be like Him (Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2; Rom. 8:29-30)**

If you want to know what we will be like, just think resurrected Christ. When we rise, we will be like Christ having a body like His. I have an entire devotional for you today in your bulletins on that subject. Jesus didn't have wings or need wings to ascend into heaven. He had His body that was buried but was transformed and raised in power with new capabilities. We too, will be raised in power. Our bodies will be perfect, individual personalities perfected. Perfect minds. Glorified as He was glorified.

C. **Jesus appeals to God's relationship with the presently living patriarchs in the Pentateuch.**

Remember, the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection or afterlife because they said they couldn't find any sufficient evidence in the Pentateuchal writings. Again, there is plenty of evidence, starting with godly Enoch (Gen. 5:24). Jesus instead appeals to the very character of God, the fact that **He is the God of the living, not the God of the dead.**

And this is what is neat, He takes one of the most prominent and memorable and cherished portions of the Pentateuch that no one denies and every child knows, to prove the afterlife. He takes them back to the burning bush in the wilderness in Exodus 3 where God appeared to Moses. He says, "*But regarding the fact that the dead rise again, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living: you are greatly mistaken.*"

Jesus makes the point that even though Abraham and Isaac and Jacob have died, they haven't ceased to exist. God is still the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. When God spoke to Moses there, He used the **present tense**, indicating He is now and forever will be the God of these patriarchs^{xi} whom He made covenants with. He is not the God *who was* the God of, or *who used to be* the God of, but He is the God of Abe, Isaac and Jacob who are still living.

❖ **God is the God of the living who have died. (Jn. 11:25)**

This is what Jesus meant by *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die."* They live in heaven and life is completed later by resurrection.

It's helpful here to think in light of covenants. A covenant is only in place as long as both parties are alive. Well, if the Abraham and Isaac and Jacob ceased to exist when they died, then the covenants are no longer binding and in effect. But **they are alive, and in His fidelity to the covenants with them, God has obligated Himself to one day totally fulfill the covenants with them, including raising them back to life to do it.**^{xii} One man said, "Every promise of God must be fulfilled, specifically to the person to whom it was made. That principle was in Abraham's mind when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac" (Heb. 11:17-19). In Genesis 22:5 Abraham said to his men, *"Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you."* Abraham reasoned that even if he sacrificed Isaac, God would have to raise him from the dead to fulfill the covenant through Isaac like He promised. Hebrews 11 tells us this was by faith in the power of God to raise the dead to keep His promises.

And that's the ultimate question as we wrap it up this morning: Do you have faith that God can raise the dead? Because if what Jesus is teaching is true, and He proved it by undisputedly rising from the grave, then **this is life-changing stuff.** *"What happens after you die?"* is not the most important question in this life and neither is *"Where will you spend eternity?"* The most important question is, ***"Have you trusted in the risen Christ as your Savior?"*** because the answer to that determines where you spend eternity. My prayer is that you will put your faith in Christ today and spend eternity with God in His glorious presence in the New Heaven and New Earth and New Jerusalem forever (Rev. 21-22). A place where there is no sickness or pain or suffering or tears of sadness. If you're wondering how to make sure you get to Heaven, know that it's only by faith in Christ in what He did for you on the cross.

Jesus said this in John 6:40, *"For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."*

ⁱ Charles Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible: Note on Matthew 3:7* (Chicago: Moody Press), 1170.

ⁱⁱ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of Messiah from a Jewish Messianic Perspective, Volume 3* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2018), 276.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 269.

^{iv} Ryrie, *ibid.*

^v Kent Hughes, Josephus, *Jewish War, II*, 8.14.

^{vi} Erwin Lutzer, *When a Nation Forgets God* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 132.

^{vii} Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 294.

^{viii} Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*.

^{ix} Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 257

^x *Ibid.*, 297.

^{xi} Chuck Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 2* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 319.

^{xii} Thomas Constable, Constable's Notes, <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/mark.pdf>