

THE GOD OF THE LIVING

Mark 12:18-27

Key Verses: 12:26-27

“Now about the dead rising--have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!”

Last week, Jesus told us, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (17). He taught us about our basic duties as citizens of this country and of the kingdom of God. We also learned that we must learn a spirit of giving, by remembering the grace of Jesus who gave us his life on the cross.

In today’s passage, the Sadducees ask Jesus a question about marriage at the resurrection. In response, Jesus teaches us that in heaven, things will be different from this world. We will be like the angels. Above all, Jesus teaches us that our God is the God of the living! May God help us to know what this means!

I. “WHOSE WIFE WILL SHE BE?” (18-23)

Look at verse 18. *Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question.* One day a group of religious leaders came to Jesus with a question. Who were they? They were the Sadducees. The Sadducees heard that the Pharisees failed terribly in their attempt to trap Jesus. They felt good, and wanted to show their superior sophistication over the Pharisees. So they cooked up a more convoluted question to trap Jesus. Let’s see what their question was and how Jesus helped them.

But first, a little bit of background on the Sadducees. They were one of the Jewish religious parties during the days of Christ and the early church. They were a minority party, comprised of aristocratic and wealthy people. Unlike the Pharisees, they were worldly and political. They collaborated with the Romans in order to protect their wealth and political power. They resisted the truth of the gospel. Most of all, they denied the resurrection of the body, personal immortality, and retribution (punishment and reward) in a future life. “The doctrine of the Sadducees,” says Josephus the Jewish historian, “is this, that souls die with the bodies.” Thus, the Sadducees denied the existence of angels and spirits (Ac 23:8). Instead, their focus was on this world. They loved this world. They did not want to think about the judgment of God (2Co 5:10), because their life on earth was good. They were attached to this world. So they denied the resurrection of the body. They were like little children who cover their eyes with their hands and say, “There is no sky.”

Look at verses 19-22. *“Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. The second one married the widow, but he also*

died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?” What a sad story they made up! It reads like a bad script for Jewish soap opera. Perhaps their title was, “Seven Weddings and Eight Funerals,” or “Seven Men and No Baby.” In their story, a woman lived a most horrifying life. She was married to seven brothers, all of whom died one after another, leaving no children. The woman had to bury seven husbands, one by one. She had to attend seven funerals, each time as the grieving widow. Her heart was broken seven times. Finally, she also died.¹

The point of the Sadducees’ question was, “At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven brothers were married to her?” The Sadducees thought that by asking the question, they could repudiate the whole notion of resurrection. They wanted to make resurrection a ridiculous idea.

The Sadducees’ story of the seven brothers’ deaths and the death of the woman tells us what was on their minds. Death was on their minds. The Sadducees were wealthy and successful. They were married to beautiful wives. They lived in a mansion with a three-chariot garage and a heated swimming pool. They enjoyed their comfortable life and social status. So they wanted to live in this world forever and never die. But they knew deep down in their hearts that their good life was coming to an end, sooner or later. The Sadducees tried very hard to ignore this reality. But the fear of death was there in the back of their minds.

This fear of the Sadducees is actually a common problem to all mankind. No matter how successful a person may be in this world, he or she will have to face death sooner or later. I am sorry to remind you that the human mortality rate is 100 percent. King David was a warrior, poet, musician, and powerful king. But he was terrified when he thought about his death. He trembled when he thought about his dead body being eaten by worms and maggots. How did he overcome the fear of death? He found the answer in God. When he came to believe the power of God over death, David breathed a sigh of relief. He could rejoice in God when he realized that God would raise him from the dead. He was a happy man because of his resurrection hope. He even looked forward to the resurrection of one of his descendants—the resurrection of our Lord Jesus!

II. THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB (24-27)

The Sadducees probably had an evil grin on their faces when they asked Jesus the question, “At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?” But Jesus was not angry at them for their sly motive. Instead, he taught them the truth of God. Look at verses 24-25. *Jesus replied, “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither*

¹ The Sadducees probably based their hypothetical story on Deuteronomy 25:5-10. According to the Mosaic law, if a man died and left no child, it was the duty of the next brother to take his older brother’s widow as his wife and have a child for his brother so that his family line could be preserved. The story about Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 is an illustration of this law.

marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. We can learn several things from Jesus' answer.

First, “because you do not know the Scriptures.” The Sadducees came to Jesus to trap him. Jesus knew their malicious intention, but he gently scolded them and taught them the truth. He said, *“Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?”* Jesus drew their attention to God's word. When Jesus saw them, they had many problems. But the root problem was that they did not know the Scriptures. In particular, they did not know or accept the power of God. Jesus helped them to believe the basic truths in the Bible. To begin, Genesis teaches that God created the heavens and the earth and everything in it (Ge 1:1). He created man and woman in his own image. God also planted the beautiful Garden of Eden in the east. There God established a marriage between Adam and Eve so that they could serve God's purpose together as a team. Even when they betrayed his love and sinned against him, God still loved them. He called one man Abraham with a long-term redemptive plan to send a Savior for the sinful humanity. Tragically, the Sadducees did not know this love or power of God. They did not know God and the love of God.

We are told that the Sadducees decided not to believe in resurrection, claiming that the word does not appear in the Pentateuch (five books of Moses). If true, they had a serious problem in studying the word of God. It means they did not really believe the very first verse of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 declares that our God is the Creator God. He created the vast universe including all the lives. How could they limit the power of God by rejecting resurrection? In Genesis 22, Abraham decided to offer his only son Isaac as a burnt offering to God, because he believed that God could raise the dead (Heb 11:19). Jesus also quoted from Exodus to teach them about the God of the living. So it appears that the Sadducees studied the word of God without an absolute attitude or awesome respect. They accepted only the Scriptures they liked and rejected the part they didn't like. This was a serious problem and should serve as a warning to us. We should not pick and choose only the Scriptures that we like. The Bible is the word of God. As such, we should study it with awesome respect and let the Holy Spirit speak to us. We should struggle to accept the Scriptures that seem to be at odds with our own thinking and obey them as well. The Sadducees accepted the word of God selectively and they became practical non-believers. The Pharisees studied the Bible with a self-righteous attitude and became hypocrites. Neither of them was useful before God.

Second, “they will be like the angels in heaven.” Look at verse 25. *When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.* In this verse, Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven is not an extension of this world. Heaven is not some upgrade version of this world. We are not going to spend a lot of time in heaven struggling over mundane things, as we have to do in this world. Instead, we will be like the angels, meaning that we will be like the resurrected Jesus. 1 Corinthians 15:49 says, “And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” Jesus told the Sadducees that there is no struggle of marriage or possessions in heaven. We don't know all the details of life in heaven until we get there. But we do know that we won't have to worry about things like mortgage payments, hospital bills, plumbing problems, car problems, and so on.

Instead, we will enjoy our life with our Lord forever. It will be glorious. We will have joy, peace and security with our Lord Jesus in heaven!

We all know that marriage is a joyful event in this world. I know a young man who is eagerly waiting for the day God will establish a house church with a woman of faith. It will be a joyful day for him and for all of us. But we know that marriage is not an end itself in our pursuit of happiness. On the contrary, there are plenty of marriages that are less than bliss. Some people begin to fight even during their honeymoon trip. Still, we know that a marriage is a blessing and a source of joy. Yet Jesus says that in heaven, there will be no marriage. But don't worry. It is because we will not need to marry someone to have a joyful life in heaven. We will not need any other human things to be joyful, for that matter. We will be joyful with our Lord Jesus in eternity. He will be our eternal bridegroom. I believe it will be fantastic. We will be like the angels.

Third, “He is the God of the living.” Look at verses 26-27. *Now about the dead rising--have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!”* Verse 26 is a quotation of Exodus 3:6. Moses grew up as “Prince of Egypt” and enjoyed all the perks and activities in the Empire, until he was 40. But he made a decision of faith to identify with the people of God, the Hebrew slaves. Then God sent him to the Midian desert to train him to be a shepherd of his people. Moses had to take care of Jethro's sheep, day in and day out for 40 years. Nothing exciting was happening there. He smelled like sheep and he talked like sheep. He could not feel that God is living in his fugitive life. Where was God when his people were groaning in their slave labor in Egypt? He probably felt that God was dead. One day, however, he saw a strange thing. Moses saw a bush burning. It was burning continuously but it didn't burn out. So he went near it to examine closely. There God spoke to him: “Moses, Moses, take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:4-5). Then God said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6).



What did God mean when he said, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob”? God taught Moses that he is the living God. He was not dead. He heard the groans of his people and was about to send Moses to lead them out of Egypt. God was and is in charge of the world. God said, “I am the God of Abraham.” Abraham had died more than 400 years earlier. So did Isaac and Jacob. They were all dead. But God said, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” He didn't say, “I was the God of Abraham.” He meant that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were still living, even though they had died a long time ago. God is not the God of the dead but of the living.

The Bible teaches us that we will live eternally even though we all die physically, if we believe in Jesus. In John 11:24-25, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

God is the God of the living. The living God is in control of the universe. God is the Ruler of history. At the time of Moses, Egypt was a powerful nation. The Egyptians advanced mathematics, astronomy and architecture, and so on. Theirs was a glorious civilization. But where is the glory of Egypt today? We only see the ruins of it in the pyramids, mummies and the Sphinx. Similarly, the Babylonian civilization and the Roman civilization are gone. The point is that the worldly kingdoms are temporal. The world constantly changes. But God’s history is steadily advancing according to his will and plan. In the midst of the ups and downs of worldly kingdoms, God has kept his promises faithfully. As God promised, he sent his one and only Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. As he promised, God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day to give us eternal life. Our God is the living God who fulfills his promises throughout human history. He is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

Look at verse 27 again. “*He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!*” The Sadducees were alive physically, but they were dead spiritually because they did not believe in resurrection. Without the hope of resurrection, they were fatalistic. They did not have a true meaning and purpose in life. So they concentrated on their life in this world. Without the hope of resurrection, many young people today become hedonistic, because momentary pleasures are the only things they can hold on to. They cannot but become fatalistic. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) said “God is dead.” When this angry German philosopher refused to believe in God, he became very fatalistic. He said things like, “Error has transformed animals into men; is truth perhaps capable of changing man back into an animal?” (from his book, *Human, all too Human*) God is not dead; Nietzsche is dead. Our God is alive. He is the God of the living!

Many people in this world ignore God because he is invisible. But God is not dead just because he is invisible. Jesus wants us to believe that God is the God of the living. What difference does it make to believe in the God of the living? If we believe that God is the God of the living, we can put our trust in him, no matter how gloomy things may appear or no matter how uncertain our future looks, because he is living. The living God will guide us in his grace and love. We can make decisions of faith, trusting this God.

This morning, we learn that our God is the God of the living. We can put our trust in him and walk with him everyday, knowing that he is a living God. We also learn that heaven is not an extension of this world. Things will be different there. May God help us to study the Scriptures with a humble learning mind so that we may personally know the God of the living!