The God of the Living

Text: Mark 12:18-27

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**Scriptures:** Exodus 3:1-6; Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Mark 12:18-27

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 326, 313, 119:41-48, 16b, ‘See what a morning’

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#41)

**Theme:**  The Sadducees ask Jesus about the resurrection of the dead and He responds by showing them their ignorance of the Scriptures and by confirming that the covenant Lord of Israel is God of the living, not the dead.

**Proposition:**  Believe that the dead are raised to life only in Christ

**Introduction**

In the run up to the recent New Zealand General Election there was a series of televised debates between the leaders of the different political parties. Many of us are interested in how high-profile leaders respond to probing questions because this often demonstrates their grasp of topical issues, their ability to think clearly ‘on their feet’ and their position on important issues.

Public debate is nothing new. The ancient Greeks highly valued this form of engaging in robust combat by using words. Jewish Rabbis also used the verbal interchanges of question and answer to debate theological, moral and religious matters. We see this pattern in Mark chapter twelve. Firstly as some of the Jewish Pharisees and Herodians try to ‘trap Jesus in his talk’ by asking whether they should pay taxes to the Roman Emperor Caesar. Secondly, as the Sadducees came to Jesus with a tricky question about the marital state of a resurrected woman in the next life. (She had had a series of seven different husbands in this life). Thirdly, one of the scribes asked Jesus about the greatest commandment

Our focus this morning is on the second of these three conversations and the significance for our lives today of what Jesus said to the Sadducees. Let’s look then at Mark 12:18-27 under the following points:

1. Jesus is tested by the Sadducees
2. Jesus rebukes the Sadducees
3. Jesus confirms the resurrection of the body
4. **Jesus is tested by the Sadducees (v18-23)**

Mark tells the readers of his gospel an important fact about the Sadducees – that they ‘*say there is no resurrection*’ (v18). The Sadducees were a group of high priests, aristocratic families, and merchants. They were materially wealthy and wielded significant power in 1st century Roman-occupied Israel. The Sadducees only recognised the first five books of the Bible (The Torah) as having authority. As a result they denied the immortality of the soul, bodily resurrection after death, and the existence of angels (ref. Acts 23:8). The Sadducees rejected the oral tradition of the Pharisees and generally tended to cultivate closer relationships with the foreign Roman rulers. This background helps us to understand why their formulated their tricky question to Jesus in the way they did.

To our ears it might sound like a very peculiar scenario they put forward when they say to Jesus: “*Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring. And the second took her, and died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. And the seven left no offspring. Last of all the woman also died. In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife*” (v19-23).

The Old Testament Mosaic law they are referring to is found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. Notice that this is from the part of the Scriptures (the five ‘books of Moses’) that the Sadducees did accept as being authoritative. The purpose of this law was to aim to ensure that the family line (and associated property rights) of a man who died before his wife conceived a child to bear his name could be continued by the nearest of kin. This is called the law of ‘levirate marriage’ (from the Latin word ‘levir’ meaning “husband’s brother”). This practice goes back to patriarchal times and is referenced in Genesis 38:8-11; Ruth 3:1-4:12 as well as in our text and the parallel gospel accounts in Matt 22:23-28 and Luke 20:27-33.

We do not know if the case of a woman who successively married seven brothers when she was repeatedly widowed had actually happened or whether it was just a hypothetical example. It seems more likely that the Sadducees had constructed this complicated marital history as a test case to show the absurdity (in their minds) of the idea of a bodily resurrection. By trapping Jesus in his talk they would almost certainly score a victory in one way or another: If Jesus endorsed the doctrine of the resurrection of the body their example case would surely show everyone listening how ridiculous this is when a woman in the next life is faced with having been married to seven different men. If Jesus rejected the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, then this would be a ‘win’ for them over their rivals the Pharisees and this would also serve to increase the Pharisees’ animosity towards Jesus even more.

Remember when Jesus was twelve years old, and his parents accidently left him behind in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-51)? Luke records that when they returned to the city, they found Jesus ‘*in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers*’ (Luke 2:46-47). Jesus, the perfect man, knows the Scriptures, knows the heart of all people (John 2:25) and, as we will see, could not be caught out by the craftiness of evil men who sought to destroy Him. As Mark’s gospel unfolds, we see again and again how He defeated His enemies with superior understanding and wisdom.

The events of our text likely took place on the Tuesday of the week in which Jesus would be killed. Within three days – during the night of the Thursday evening/Friday morning, Jesus would be brought before the Sanhedrin when ‘*all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together*’ (Mark 14:53). These often-opposing groups would put aside their differences and unite with the common aim of killing the man who had shown them up to be what they were. They hated Him because He was without fault, full of grace and truth and He publicly rebuked them, as we’ll see in our 2nd point.

1. **Jesus rebukes the Sadducees (v24-26)**

In this church we believe that ‘*the Bible is the Word of God, the supreme authority for doctrine and life*’ (PoF form). We believe that all of Scripture is ‘God-breathed’ and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). Down through history, at various times and in different places, people have only believed parts of the Scripture to be true and to have authority. For example, we have already noted that the Sadducees only recognised the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) as true.

Later in history, after the New Testament had been written, the 2nd century AD theologian Marcion of Sinope refused to believe that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. As a result, Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament, part of Luke’s gospel and bits of Paul’s epistles. His ‘canon of Scripture’ consisted of only eleven books. More recently some, like prominent theologian Lloyd Geering, have taught, amongst other things, that the Bible’s record of the death and resurrection of Jesus is not true. Today, some people reject the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis, believing that they should not be taken literally, but rather as myth, mere poetry or the faulty perspective of pre-scientific people.

One of the many truths that are revealed through the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ is that He believed the entire Scripture to be perfectly true and reliable. A phrase we find recorded on the lips of Jesus in the gospels is ‘*have you not read*’? Christ repeatedly referenced the Old Testament (that was the whole Bible at the time He lived on this earth) to prove the truth of His Words e.g. When Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread in the desert, He quoted Deuteronomy 8.3 “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*"(Matt 4:4). When asked about divorce by the Pharisees, He replied: “*Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’?”* (Matt 19:4-5).

Here in our text, notice that Jesus references Exodus 3:1-6 when He says, “*And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'*”? (v26) Did you notice that Jesus quoted from the section of Scripture that the Sadducees did recognise as having authority? – from ‘the book of Moses’ a phrase referring to the Torah – the first five books of the Bible. Jesus reminds them that when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, God identified Himself with these words “*I* ***am*** *the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?*” Not “*I* ***was*** *the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*”.

Those who are bound to the God of the covenant by faith are bound to the self-existent Living God. Just as a spiritually dead person cannot be in relationship with the Living God, so a person who is spiritual alive must, by definition, be in a relationship with the God who is the source of all life. Just as the eternal God cannot die, so those who are bound to Him cannot die. God is the God of Abraham as much today as when Abraham first “*believed the Lord and He counted it to Him as righteousness*’ (Gen 15:6).

Now you might say, well I can see that now, but I can also understand why the Sadducees might have missed that when they read Exodus 3:6. The truth is that they access to rest of the Old Testament, but they ignored it. They could have read about the resurrection of the body in many places for example: Job 19:25-27; Ps 16:9-11; 17:15; 73:24-26; Isa 26:19; 53:11; Eze 37:1-14; Dan 12:2; Hos 6:2; 13:14. Instead they obstinately refused to accept all the Scriptures as the true revelation of God, so they were, as Jesus plainly states it ‘wrong’ (v24, 27). The Greek word translated ‘wrong’ literally means to wander, to go down the wrong path, to go astray. Jesus says to them “*Is this not the reason you are wrong (have gone astray) because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?*’ (v24).

The power of God is revealed in the Scriptures and to ignore some or all of what God has revealed is not to know the fullness of His power and glory. In His response to the Sadducees, Jesus confirmed the resurrection of the body, as we’ll see in our third point.

1. **Jesus confirms the resurrection of the body**

When I was in Tasmania recently, I went tramping in a wilderness area along what is called the ‘Overland Track’. I knew what to expect in detail because before I went, I had studied maps, watched other people’s experiences on YouTube, and read through the information on the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service website. If we are going to visit a place very different from home, then we generally like to know as many details as we can so that we can imagine and anticipate what it will be like to be there.

The Scriptures reveal some details about what life will be like for God’s people on the New Earth, but there is much that the Lord has not decided to share with us at this stage. For example: Will our resurrection bodies be exactly the same size and shape as our bodies in this life? Perhaps as measured in the ‘prime of adult life’? Will there be the same animals on the New Earth as there are both now, and in times past, on this planet? Will we have work to do like some of the tasks we do now, apart from the effects of sin?

In His response to the Sadducees, Jesus not only confirms the resurrection of the body, but also reveals more about the nature of human relationships on the New Earth. There will be no more marriage between a husband and his wife (v25). Just as the angels do not marry one another (notice in His reply that Jesus confirms the existence of angels to the Sadducees who did not believe in them) so, people will not marry one another.

Some people may be surprised by what Jesus said. It is difficult for us on this earth to imagine a world without marriage, without bearing and raising children. It is hard to conceive of a life in which our bodies do not deteriorate with age, never get sick, never know grief or sadness, never die. Yet, this is the glorious reality that God has promised to all who have faith in His Son Jesus Christ. The Lord calls us to believe that His Word is true and to trust Him for the details about our future that He has not revealed to us.

Many people have gone astray by not believing all God’s Word to be true – people like the Sadducees, Marcion, Lloyd Geering and others. Many people have gone astray by speculating about the New Heavens and New Earth and even pretending to have extra revelation from God in which they have been given details of the future that we do not find in Scripture. We can be sure that there will be no marriages between people on the New Earth, because Jesus has told us. Today you and I can have complete certainty that the bodies of everyone who has ever lived will be raised again, either to eternal life or to eternal death (Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29).

The essence of true life is knowing the power of God who is the Giver of life. It was His divine power that breathed life into the first man Adam (Gen 2:7) and His divine power that formed the first woman from the man (Gen 2:22). It is His divine power that reverses the effects of the fall by making those who were once dead in their trespasses and sins to be alive together with Christ (Eph 2:1-5).

The power of God to raise the dead was wonderfully revealed in the man Jesus Christ, who, though killed through the evil plotting of the Sadducees and others, rose from the grave. He rose as the Saviour who had paid for the sins of all God’s people and who had lived in perfect obedience all his life on this earth. He alone is the One through whom people like you and me await our future bodily resurrection to life eternal. He explained this to Martha in the words we heard earlier from John 11: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26).*

Jesus ended his conversation with the Sadducees by speaking to them about God: “*He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong*” (v27). Literally ‘*You have greatly gone astray*”. Do not go astray today. Do not be deceived. Do not go down the wrong path. Believe in the reality of the coming resurrection of your body. Do not reject Christ as Lord and Saviour, for such unbelief surely leads to being resurrected not to life eternal, but to death eternally separated from God who is the source of life and of all good things.

Instead, accept Christ. Believe in Him. Believe that He is the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Jesus, though he or she die, yet shall he or she live, and everyone who lives and believes in Him shall never die. This is the truth.

AMEN.