

Chapter 92: The God of the Living

Matthew 22:23–33

Jesus' enemies do not give him much time to regroup. In rapid succession, the Sadducees come to test Jesus, now that he had dispatched the Pharisees and the Herodians. When the Sadducees come, they come to test him on their main theological idiosyncrasy: a denial of the resurrection of the dead. As they attempt to disprove the resurrection by an appeal to a supposed absurdity in the Bible, Jesus exposes their surface-level reading of the text to demonstrate the deeper significance of God's Word for God's people. Namely, this passage teaches us that *Christ is our resurrection hope in life and in death*.

Our Limitations in Marriage (Matt. 22:23–28)

The transitional phrase in v. 23, “the same day,” tells us both about when this event happened and also about how we should understand the significance of this event. Specifically, Matthew wants us to see this challenge from the Sadducees as related to the challenge brought to Jesus by the Pharisees and the Herodians in the previous passage.¹ As rivals to the Pharisees, the Sadducees not only wanted to show up the Pharisees, but they also had their own reasons for undermining Jesus, who also threatened their own power and position in Jerusalem, with a close connection with and dependence upon the Romans.² As Calvin observes, “For, though deadly strife existed between these two sects, yet they conspire together against Christ; so that the Pharisees are not displeased to have their own doctrine attacked in the person of Christ. Thus in the present day, we see all the forces of Satan, though in other respects they are opposed to each other, rising on every hand against Christ.”³

The Sadducees were societal elites in their day through the religious sphere.⁴ We do not know much

¹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 640.

² “In the present instance, if Jesus could be made to side with the Sadducees against the Pharisees on the question of the resurrection, Jesus would lose face, they would be vindicated, and their position with the people might be strengthened.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 558.)

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:47.

⁴ “It is striking that this is the only Gospel incident in which the Sadducees play a distinctive role. Little definite information is available about them. They lost significance in Jewish life in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.C. 70, and we know about them only from sources that are hostile to them and mostly much later. ‘Sadducee’ (*ῥδωϑυμ/Σαδδουκαῖος*) seems to be based on ‘Zadok’ (MT: *ῥδωκ*; LXX: Σαδδουκ, Σαδωκ), the name of the high priest at the time of David and Solomon, whose descendants became the authorized high-priestly line in the postexilic period. They seem to have been an aristocratic grouping with connections to the most significant priestly families. They were more conservative than the Pharisees in their insistence on strict derivation of all halachic judgments from the Pentateuch. The view of many of the church fathers that the Sadducees had completely rejected the prophets is likely to be an overstatement, but for

about their views generally, but there are a few significant points that provide helpful background for this interaction they have with Jesus. First, they prioritized the Torah (that is, the Pentateuch; Genesis through Deuteronomy) above all the other books of the Old Testament. There is debate about whether they entirely rejected the rest of the Old Testament canon altogether, but we certainly know that the Torah had the place of primacy for their religious views. Second, as Matthew notes here, the Sadducees taught that there is no resurrection, and Acts 23:8 adds that they “say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.” These two views are related, since the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead came into clearer focus in the later books of the Old Testament, and is not clearly articulated in the Torah specifically.⁵ So, the Sadducees approach Jesus to test him on these two idiosyncratic points of their doctrines.

As the Sadducees come, they flatteringly call him “Teacher,” although we should perhaps note that the flattery of the Pharisees’ disciples was much more extensive (v. 24a; Matt. 22:16). Further, they appeal to what “Moses said,” in accordance with their priority on the Torah that Moses authored.⁶ They put a particular dilemma to Jesus in the form of a horrible story of a woman who marries seven brothers in turn, all of whom die before they father a child with her (vv. 24–27). While the story sounds far-fetched, the Sadducees explicitly claim that this was a case that happened “among us.”⁷ As Lenski notes, however, “These men thought that they were wielding a two-edged sword, either edge of which would be fatal to Jesus, and they never believed that he would strike the flat side of their blade and snap it off at the very handle. They are a sample of how some men study the Scriptures by means of their own logic.”⁸

The story is built on the concept of the levirate marriage, where the Law enjoined a man to marry his brother’s widow in order to “raise up” offspring in his brother’s name, so that the first son of that new marriage would be considered the son of the deceased brother (Deut. 25:5–10). Notably, the word for “raise up” used here is related to the word for “resurrection” (the raising up of a dead

the Sadducees only the Pentateuch was foundational for faith. The Sadducees were known for their rejection of the idea of resurrection, and that is what comes into focus here. Since a notion of resurrection is clearly attested in Dn. 12:2–3 (which may well be echoed in Mt. 22:30 below), Sadducean rejection of resurrection implies non-acceptance of Daniel as authoritative Scripture.” (Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 901–02.)

⁵ “Belief in life after death seems to emerge late in the development of OT thought. Many of the expressions of future hope especially in the Psalms (Pss 16:9–11; 49:15; 73:23–26; cf. Job 19:25–27), which are naturally taken to refer to life after death once that belief is established, need not have been so understood originally. The resuscitation of dead bodies in Ezek 37:1–14 was only a symbolic expression of the hope of the restoration of Israel; even Isa 26:19 *could* be interpreted in the same way. The explicit prediction in Dan 12:2 that the dead will rise stands out as exceptional (and late) within the OT canon. From the second century B.C. onward belief in life after death is expressed increasingly clearly in Jewish literature, particularly in connection with the martyrs of the Maccabean period. But it was easy for the Sadducees, for whom the five books of Moses were the supreme authority (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.16), to dismiss this as an aberration from the this-worldly focus of the true Mosaic religion. For them Sheol was the final resting place, and any futurity was to be looked for in terms of reputation and posterity, not personal survival or resurrection.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 836.)

⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 804.

⁷ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 903.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 869. Lenski, among other commentators, classifies this dilemma as a *reduction ad absurdum*.

person) used in the rest of this story. Morris notes that this is important: “The Sadducees were interested in marriage as the way of ‘raising up’ descendants for a man who had died without issue so as to perpetuate his name (Deut. 25:6); Jesus points to the fact that this limits the power of God. God can ‘raise up’ people by way of resurrection; the man’s name does not need to be perpetuated, for he himself will be ‘raised up.’”⁹

The dilemma, then, comes in the final question the Sadducees ask Jesus: “In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her” (v. 28). While this question clearly rides the hobby horse of the Sadducees, and they pose it to Jesus in order to discredit Jesus and the Pharisees at the same time, France argues that their question is nevertheless worth considering, in light of the fact that many people have remarried after spouses died: “For many people the prospect of encountering more than one former spouse in the afterlife is a real one. The question, even if not the questioners, deserves a serious answer.”¹⁰ Who will be married to whom in eternity, without polygamy or, in this case, polyandry?

Our Likeness to the Angels (Matt. 22:29–30)

Jesus flatly rejects the premises of their argument: “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (v. 29). Like many who distort the Bible, they begin with a false premise and then pounce upon a perceived difficulty in the Scripture in order to twist biblical teaching into a direction that it does not move. Specifically, the Sadducees reject the resurrection in part from a false view that resurrection would mean mere resuscitation of the dead, in order for life to continue on more or less as it does right now.¹¹ Morris rightly observes that “it is one thing to be able to quote passages that one thinks support one’s preconceived position and quite another to understand and follow the teaching of Scripture. To understand and to yield oneself to what Scripture says is quite different from quoting passages in the way the Sadducees were doing.”¹²

Thus, their error arises partially from twisting the Scriptures, and partially from a dim view of the power of God. They imagine that resurrection will be merely a resuscitation, and not a resurrection, transformation, and glorification of earthly life for God’s people to dwell in his presence forever. Instead, Jesus continues to explain, “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (v. 30). In what sense will resurrected human beings resemble angels? While the Sadducees do not believe even in spirits (Acts 23:8), Jesus is not saying that human beings will be like the angels in becoming disembodied spirits or souls. Indeed, Jesus is arguing for the resurrection of the body, so the point of comparison must lie elsewhere than in the resurrection of our bodies. Instead, Jesus tells us that the point of his comparison is in regard to marriage: whereas human beings “marry” and “are given in marriage,” angels are not. In the resurrection, human beings will become like angels in respect to refraining from marriage. As Morris noted above, one of the contrasts this passage makes between marriage and resurrection comes in the way that marriage “raises up” children, even though marriage cannot “raise up” the dead. Similarly,

⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 560.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 838.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 871.

¹² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 560.

Hendriksen explains the comparison with the angels by writing, “Since there will be no death, the race will not have to be reproduced.”¹³ God’s power in resurrection will transcend and abrogate one of the chief purposes for marriage: raising up offspring to perpetuate human life.

Further, God’s power in resurrection transcended the particular issue of levirate marriage that the Sadducees had raised. Levirate marriage seems bizarre to modern thinking, but it played a crucial role in fulfilling God’s covenant promises to his people after their deaths. Specifically, God had promised his people to give Abraham offspring and land (Gen. 17:7–8). The land was given as an inheritance, to be passed down throughout the generations of the offspring of the tribes of Israel. Levirate marriage, then, made a provision to avoid cutting off a man’s name in Israel (Deut. 25:6), where a son born to the brother of a dead man would be counted as the son of the dead man—to perpetuate the dead man’s name, and to receive the dead man’s inheritance. Notice, then, that this provision for levirate marriage carried the logic of God’s covenant faithfulness to his people beyond their deaths, but only to a limited degree. Resurrection will extend that covenantal logic beyond the deaths of his people in the most absolute terms possible.

Our Living to God (Matt. 22:31–33)

Jesus said that the Sadducees knew “neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (v. 29). If v. 30 we saw one aspect of the Sadducees failure to understand the Scriptures and God’s power, and in vv. 31–33 we see another. As Jesus does elsewhere, he expresses amazement that they “have not read” the Scriptures (Matt. 12:3; 19:4; 21:16, 42).¹⁴ Notably, though, Jesus expresses amazement that they have “not read what was said to you by God” (v. 31b): “In v. 24 they asserted ‘Moses said,’ so now Jesus trumps that by saying, ‘in actuality God said.’”¹⁵ Then, Jesus quotes Exodus 3:6: “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (v. 32a), and concludes by arguing, “He is not God of the dead, but of the living” (v. 32b).

It is a point of great debate as to why Jesus chose this specific verse as his prooftext for the resurrection of the dead. France is surely honest when he writes, “In this case one must feel some sympathy for them, since Jesus’ argument is so briefly and cryptically expressed that even the Christian reader with a belief in resurrection needs to read between the lines to see how this text supports it.”¹⁶ Nearly all commentators recognize that Jesus strategically quotes from the Torah, since Exodus was one of the only five books that the Sadducees recognized as absolutely authoritative.

Beyond that, commentators have offered several suggestions for Jesus’ choice of this passage. For Morris, this passage is important since it is not “obscure” but “very much quoted,” where the clear implications of the present tense suggests that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must still be alive.¹⁷ Nolland, on the other hand, points to the significance of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for Matthew’s Gospel (Matt. 1:2; 8:11) as well as the concept that God could not continue to “represent himself as

¹³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 805–06.

¹⁴ Osborne, *Matthew*, 817.

¹⁵ Osborne, *Matthew*, 817–18.

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 837.

¹⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 561.

their God if he had finished his work with them and abandoned them to the grave.”¹⁸ Carson points to God’s covenant faithfulness: “God is the eternal God of the covenant, a fact especially stressed wherever reference is made to the patriarchs (e.g., Ge 24:12, 27, 48; 26:24; 28:13; 32:9; 46:1, 3–4; 48:15–16; 49:25). He always loves and blesses his people; therefore it is inconceivable that his blessings cease when his people die (cf. Pss 16:10–11; 17:15; 49:14–15; 73:23–26).”¹⁹

While all of these points are valid, I think Carson is closest to the mark; however, I would suggest that Jesus has a clear reason for pointing to Exodus 3:6. Specifically, Jesus is pointing to a second limitation of marriage. In addition to the limitation of marriage only to “raising up” children (so that marriage is incapable of “raising up” the dead), so also marriage is limited by death. The crucial detail in the Sadducees’ story was that, in each case, the woman’s husband had died, so that she was free to remarry. Thus, the covenant obligations of marriage are dissolved at death. In the case of Exodus 3:6, the Lord is responding to a real question of whether he has forgotten his covenant, and whether, in his forgetfulness, he has abandoned his people to their slavery. Indeed, the book of Exodus opens with the grim statement that “Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation....Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (Ex. 1:6, 8). Now that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are dead, will God forget his covenant, just as Egypt’s new king forgot Joseph? Right before Exodus 3, however, we read that “God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Ex. 2:24). Whereas the obligations of the covenant of marriage dissolve upon death, the great significance of God’s covenant with his people is that it does *not* dissolve upon death. God is faithful to keep his covenant promises to his people even after they die.

Here, then, is where the doctrine of the resurrection comes into full focus. If God is faithful to his people after they die, then, as Carson wrote, “it is inconceivable that his blessings cease when his people die.” If so, then the resurrection is the ultimate demonstration of God’s faithfulness to his people. For that resurrection, we groan with all creation as we await our liberation from sin, corruption, and mortality (Rom. 8:23). Without that resurrection, “if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). The covenant of marriage, far from disproving the resurrection, stands as a glorious, but woefully partial, picture of God’s resurrection promises to his people. The Sadducees had asked Jesus whose husband the woman would have, but Jesus asks them to think instead about whose *God* we have.

“And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching” (v. 33).

Discussion Questions

1. How does the transitional phrase “the same day” connect this passage back to the previous interaction of Jesus with the Pharisees and the Herodians (v. 23a)? Who were the Sadducees, and why did they deny the resurrection (v. 23b; cp. Acts 23:8)? What was levirate marriage, and why did God provide for levirate marriage in the Old Testament (v. 24; cp. Deut. 25:5–10)? Why do we need to think theologically about provisions in the Bible like this one?

¹⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 906.

¹⁹ Carson, “Matthew,” 520.

2. What did Jesus mean when he said that the Sadducees did not understand the Scriptures or the power of God (v. 29)? In what respect will those whom God resurrects become like angels in heaven (v. 30)? Why were children considered an important part of God's fulfillment of his covenant promises to his people, even beyond their deaths (see Gen. 17:7–8)? Why does the resurrection make marriage and reproduction unnecessary for the fulfillment of God's promises?
3. Why did Jesus quote from Exodus 3:6 to prove the doctrine of the resurrection? How does God's covenant faithfulness to those who have died compare to the covenant obligations of a man or woman whose spouse has died? What comfort can we take in God's ongoing faithfulness beyond our deaths? How does this concept of covenantal faithfulness suggest that we still live to God, even after we die?
4. What comfort does the resurrection hold for you? How often do you think about the resurrection? What associations do you have when you think about the resurrection? How does death's looming shadow affect the way that you are living today? If you were to die today, and God were to ask you why he should permit you to enter his kingdom, what would you say? What is your only comfort in life and in death?