

Matthew 22:23-33

I. Matthew 22:23a — The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection.

This is now the second of three attempts to trap Jesus in His words. In the last passage it was the Pharisees who sent their disciples along with the Herodians to ask Jesus a question about paying taxes to Caesar. But now it's the Sadducees who come to Jesus with a question. In a couple of ways, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were complete opposites. The Pharisees said that the rule of Rome was illegitimate. But the wealthy Sadducees were quite content to live under Roman rule. Much more importantly, though, the Pharisees recognized not only the authority of the entire Old Testament, but they had also surrounded the law (the first five books of Moses) with an official and very authoritative *tradition*. There was the written law, and then there was the *oral law*. The Sadducees, however, were very strict in their rejection of any doctrine or teaching that did not arise *directly* from the five books of Moses. Not only did the Sadducees reject the oral tradition of the Pharisees, but they also placed the rest of the Old Testament on a lower level than the law. If a doctrine appeared to be taught in the Prophets, but not in the law, then that doctrine was to be rejected. The Law of Moses was supremely authoritative over everything else and therefore the *only* authoritative source of true doctrine. This explains why the Sadducees said that there was no resurrection – the doctrine of the resurrection of the body was nowhere *explicitly* taught in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy. So after the failed attempt of the Pharisees to trap Jesus in His words, here come the Sadducees – the ones who say that there is no resurrection.

II. Matthew 22:23b–24 — And they asked [Jesus] a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.’”

The Sadducees are referring back to the teaching of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter twenty-five:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 25:5 (cf. Gen. 38:8) — If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies *and has no son*, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.

In Old Testament Israel, the continuation of the family name and line was extremely important, not least of all because this was tied to the inheritance of the land – which was a gift from God. In Old Testament Israel, it was especially true that a man's name lived on in his son. Now the Sadducees have referred back to the teaching of Moses in Deuteronomy 25:5, but they haven't given an exact quotation. “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.’” The Sadducees have worded Moses so as to introduce the Greek word for “raise up” (“raise up offspring”), which “just happens” to be related to the word for *resurrection*. In the thinking of the Sadducees, the only sense in which there can be any future “life after death” is in the “raising up” of children through whom a man's name would live on even after he had died. So our memories have been refreshed as to what Moses said. But what's the point? Where are the Sadducees going with this?

III. Matthew 22:25–28 — “Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.”

The Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection, and yet just this once they will assume the resurrection only in order to make fun of it, and especially in order to humiliate Jesus in front of the crowds. You say that there will be a resurrection of the dead. Okay, then, in this resurrection life, how will it be decided to whom this woman in our story will be married? Or will she be married to all seven of her former husbands at the same time? In the thinking of the Sadducees, the doctrine of the resurrection was plainly ludicrous and absurd. And in the thinking of the Sadducees, Jesus will clearly not be able to give any kind of sensible answer to their question.

IV. Matthew 22:29 — But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.”

The NIV translates, “You are in error...” The NET and the HCSB translate, “You are deceived” (cf. Lenski) I wonder how often we ourselves are deceived and in error simply because we don't truly know and comprehend the Scriptures, or perhaps because we don't truly know and understand the power of God. The lesson here is that if our thinking is not solidly *rooted* in a clear *understanding* of the Scriptures, and if our thinking is not solidly *rooted* in a strong *consciousness* of the omnipotence (the all powerful nature) of the one true God, then we *will* ultimately be confused and led astray (cf. YLT) in our thinking – whether in small or in big ways. The Sadducees themselves were wrong because of two very fundamental problems: They didn't truly know and comprehend the Scriptures, and they didn't truly know and understand the power of God. And now Jesus will take up these two problems in reverse order – beginning with the Sadducees failure to understand the *power* of God.

V. Matthew 22:30 — “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.”

Too often, perhaps, we read these words of Jesus and we basically hear Him saying, “There is no marriage in heaven.” So that's a neat and simple solution to the Sadducees question. There's no need to worry about which husband the woman will be married to in the resurrection, because in the resurrection, there is no marriage! But if this kind of answer solves the problem of the woman who had seven husbands, it still isn't very *satisfying*, is it? To say that in the life of the resurrection we will no longer experience the relational intimacy and joy of the marriage relationship is certainly a very depressing thought. But then again, that's not at all what Jesus said!

This teaching about marriage and the resurrection is never found anywhere else in the Old Testament, and therefore Jesus can't blame the Sadducees here for their failure to “know the *Scriptures*.” So that's why in this *part* of Jesus' answer, He must be addressing the Sadducees' failure to know the *power* of God! But think about it! Who needs the power of God to explain

the simple, and apparently somewhat depressing fact that there is no marriage in heaven? You see, we haven't truly understood this part of Jesus' answer until we see that it is pointing us to the infinite *power* of God. When the Sadducees tried to imagine what life would be like after a supposed resurrection, they could only imagine that life in terms of what we presently know and experience today. So the Sadducees assumed that just as there is marriage in this life, so there must also be marriage in any so-called "resurrection life" (this is exactly what the Pharisees taught). If life in the resurrection is to be even better and more wonderful than life as we know it today, then certainly this resurrection life will *have* to include the relational intimacy and joy of marriage. But *here* is where we see that the Sadducees have not been rooting their thinking in a true understanding of the power of God. God, in His infinite power, is able to raise us up to an existence where we experience every bit of the relational intimacy and joy of marriage – *apart* from the institution of marriage. And we already have a model for such a joyful existence in the angels themselves. The angels in heaven do not marry, nor are they given in marriage, but should we conclude from this that they are somehow missing out on the relational joy and intimacy that we normally associate with marriage? Not at all! We cannot understand the life of the angels since we have only our own present lives to start with as a reference point. So when we consider the angels, we are left to bow in humble awe, and in humble faith before the infinite power of God. So also, when we think of what our own lives will be like in the resurrection, we *must* bow in humble awe, and in humble faith before the infinite *power* of God – the power of God to create an existence where relationships are not something *less* than marriage, but something *more*; the power of God to create an existence where the love between those who have been married on earth will *not* vanish, but rather where it will be *broadened* so that no one is excluded (cf. France). And if this is impossible for us to comprehend (and it most certainly *is*), then that's simply because we cannot comprehend the marvelous and wonderful *power* of God. We're left, then, with only two options. On the one hand, we can be suspicious and doubtful of how it is possible to know and love the *very one* that we were married to in this life with a deeper and more joyous love than we ever knew before, and yet at the same time to share this greater love equally with all of God's redeemed children. We can doubt and be depressed, or on the other hand, we can bow in humble awe, and in humble faith before the *power* of God to do the very things that we cannot begin to imagine or comprehend. May we never underestimate the power of God to bring to pass what is beyond our capacity to understand! May we never measure what it is possible for God to do based on our extremely limited experience of life lived here in this fallen world.

The Sadducees are wrong in their assumption that marriage must continue in the resurrection because they do not know the power of God. But then again, the Sadducees don't actually believe in the resurrection, because according to them, the resurrection was never taught in the Law of Moses. Remember, they were hypothetically "pretending" the resurrection only so they could make a mockery of Jesus. Jesus knows this, of course, and so He continues on in verses 31-32:

VI. Matthew 22:31–32 — “And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.”

There are a couple of direct and explicit references to the resurrection in the *Prophets* (cf. Dan. 12:2; Isa. 26:19). But Jesus knows that the Sadducees will not accept any doctrine that can be derived only from the prophets, and so He sets out to prove the resurrection from the Law of Moses. But the Sadducees have been studying the Law of Moses for all of their lives, and they have never once discovered any reference to the resurrection in the Law of Moses! They were so incredibly confident of its absence that they felt perfectly safe in ridiculing and making fun of this “unbiblical” doctrine. And yet according to Jesus, the Sadducees should have been able to understand the reality of the resurrection based simply and only upon the Law of Moses! Remember how Jesus began his answer: “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.” Jesus is saying that if the Sadducees had really *known* their own Scriptures, even if those Scriptures were limited to only the first five books of Moses, then they would have understood that the Scriptures taught, and even *demand*ed the resurrection. But how... and where? Well, the verse Jesus quotes to prove the resurrection of the dead is Exodus 3:6 where God appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

- ✓ Exodus 3:6 — And [Yahweh] said [to Moses], “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

God originally spoke these words *to Moses*, but Jesus says *to the Sadducees*: “Have you not read what was said *to you* by God.” Once again, Jesus is saying that if the Sadducees had simply *listened* to God speaking *to them* through the Law of Moses, then they certainly would have known the truth of the resurrection. Jesus isn’t quoting this verse just to make the resurrection of the dead likely, or possible, but rather to *prove* the resurrection of the dead *once and for all!* But does this verse really *prove* anything? There are some very good commentators who seem at least a little bit uncomfortable with this part of Jesus’ answer. Blomberg writes: “Whatever we may think of Jesus’ interpretation, it obviously impressed his original listeners.” France says that “in this case one must feel some sympathy for [the Sadducees].” But I think we must disagree. It’s true that Jesus is going deep into the Scriptures, but the Sadducees did claim to be the experts on these very same Scriptures. And if *we* struggle with Jesus’ answer, then this must be because we are still somewhat blinded to the *beauty, and the depth, and the riches* of God’s Word.

So what does it *mean* when God says to Moses in Exodus 3:6, “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? Only a few verses later in Exodus 3:16, God says to Moses:

- ✓ Exodus 3:16 — Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, “The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me.”

And then in Exodus 4:5 we find God commanding Moses to perform a certain miracle...

- ✓ Exodus 4:5 — ...[so that] they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.

It seems pretty clear that there is something wonderful, and rich, and powerful about these words – and shouldn’t we know this even from our own personal experience? Several hundred years before Moses, but still after Abraham had died...

- ✓ Genesis 26:24 — The LORD appeared to [Isaac]... and said, “***I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham’s sake.***”

And then a little later on...

- ✓ Genesis 28:13 — The LORD... said [to Jacob], “***I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.***”

To say that Yahweh is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob is to say that Yahweh is the God who entered into a personal, and intimate ***covenant relationship*** with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. Listen to what God said to Abraham:

- ✓ Genesis 17:7–8 (cf. 26:3) — I will establish my ***covenant*** between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an ***everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*** And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and ***I will be their God.***

On the one hand, the covenant promises themselves require a resurrection since Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not inherit the Promised Land before they died (cf. the later Rabbinic argument from Exodus 6:4; see France). But Jesus’ words go even *deeper* than this. God didn’t just make covenant promises *to* Abraham, He actually entered into covenant *relationship with* Abraham. He covenanted with an everlasting covenant *to be God* to Abraham and to His offspring after him – to all of those who by faith are true sons and daughters of Abraham (Rom. 4; 9:6-7). God didn’t just make covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob... He set His covenant *love* upon them. So then, what happened when Abraham died? Was this the end of God’s covenant love for Abraham? Was this the end of God’s covenant relationship with Abraham? Is it not self evident that when the *eternal* and *everlasting* God enters into a *covenant relationship* with human beings who are doomed to die, this is in itself the very ***strongest*** proof of the resurrection from the dead? Jesus’ point here is not that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are presently alive, otherwise the *resurrection* of the ***dead*** would have no meaning! But neither is Jesus denying that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are presently enjoying the bliss of God’s presence (cf. Mat. 17:3). That’s entirely beside the point.* One commentator puts it this way: “I am the God of ... does not need to mean that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are *still alive*; it... means that they are so essential to God – (they are a part of his very name!) – that they *will live* again. *The name of God means resurrection.*” (Bruner) God entered into such an intimate and binding covenant relationship with Abraham that He could actually ***identify*** Himself to later generations in this

* Calvin puts things very clearly and very to the point: “If we consider properly the doctrine of Scripture, the life of the soul, apart from the hope of the *resurrection*, will be a mere dream; for God does not declare that, immediately after the death of the body, souls live,—as if their glory and happiness were already enjoyed by them in perfection,—but delays the expectation of them till the last day... Since the Scriptures inform us that the spiritual life depends on the hope of the *resurrection*, and that souls, when separated from the bodies, look forward to it, whoever destroys the *resurrection* deprives souls also of their immortality.” In other words, if there is no resurrection of the body, then there is no life after death at all.

most amazing, and wonderful way: “**I AM the God of Abraham...**” *I exist* as the God of Abraham – the God who has entered into covenant relationship with Abraham. This is **who I am** – the God of Abraham.[†] But we should certainly not think of God as the God of the dead, but rather as God of the living! *Therefore*, it **must** be true that Abraham will one day be raised from the dead. If God is to *be* God, then it **must** be true that Abraham will one day come back to life. Matthew concludes:

VII. Matthew 22:33 — And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

The crowds were certainly right to be astonished. But is this all they were? Shouldn't our astonishment at the teaching of Jesus always give way to humble faith, and joyful thanksgiving, and a more faithful obedience? All we need to remember is that God covenanted to be God *not only* to Abraham, but also to his offspring after Him (Genesis 17:7-8). God has entered into covenant relationship with **us** – with His redeemed saints at Living Word Bible Church. And so now—think about it!—we are also included in the very revelation of *who God is*. God *exists* as the God who has set His covenant love upon us – that's **who God is**. Therefore, in light of *who God is*, and since He is not God of the dead, but of the living, it **must**(!!!) be true that we also will one day be raised from the dead along with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!

Isn't it obvious that this argument is not simply meant to convince us of the *fact* of the resurrection, but rather to overwhelm us with the wonderful **certainty and assurance** of the resurrection? J.C. Ryle was right when he said this: “It is easy to hold truths theoretically, and yet not realize them practically. There are few of us who would not find it good to meditate on the mighty verity which our Lord here unfolds, and to give it a prominent place in our thoughts.” What **difference** would it make in our day to day life if we realized *practically* the wonderful *truth* and *certainty* of the resurrection of the dead – remembering, too, that according to the *power* of God, our experience of resurrection life will far surpass all of our present abilities to explain or comprehend? Would we be more steadfast and immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58)? Would we grumble less, and be less overwhelmed with the trials and burdens of this life? Would our fear of death disappear perhaps *entirely*? Would our grief at the loss of a loved one be tempered somewhat more with true comfort and hope? Would we find ourselves more bold and courageous in the face of danger and opposition? Would we be filled with a more intrinsic joy and happiness from day to day? To paraphrase one commentator: “If ‘the God of Abraham’ *loses* Abraham at death, what does this say about God? Which is stronger, death or [God's covenant love]?” (Bruner) And the Apostle Paul answers:

✓ Romans 8:38–39 — For I am sure that neither **death** nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from **the love of God** in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So for Paul, and for Jesus, our own future resurrection from the dead is as **sure** as the **love of God for us**. God has entered into covenant relationship with us to **BE our God**. And He is not the God of the dead, but of the **LIVING!**

[†] Understood in this sense, the present tense of the Greek is not relevant to Jesus' argument.