

"The God of the Living"

The recent battle over Proposition 8 shows that many people think marriage is an important issue. This is the proposition that defines marriage as between one man and one woman. Now granted, Proposition 8 really represented a bigger issue than just marriage. It represented a quest for legitimacy and acceptance. On the one side, many opponents of the proposition were looking for individuals practicing homosexuality to be afforded the same rights as heterosexual couples. On the other side, many proponents of the proposition did not want any sense of moral legitimacy given to homosexuality. Certainly this larger battle will continued to be waged. There is a fundamental difference in ideology and beliefs that are behind both sides.

And yet despite the bigger issues, the stand was taken here on the institution of marriage. Both sides decided that marriage was to be the battle front of this larger divide. Some combined \$70 million dollars was spent by the two different sides on Prop 8 to campaign their respective position.

What does this tell us? It tells us that regardless of the bigger issues of gay rights, the institution of marriage is something seen as very important, even on both sides of this issue. That the critical battle lines were drawn over marriage, and not something else, speaks volumes about the institution. Americans, and I think all humans, see marriage as very important. Even with as much divorce that there is today, people still get married. They still enter their marriages with hope and excitement. People grow up dreaming about their wedding day.

And yet in our passage for today, Jesus tells us that our marriages are temporary. They are limited to this life. That's why we offer marriage vows "'Til death do us part." Marriage is an important covenant that a man and a woman enter into, but it is something limited to this life.

You see in our passage for today, a question about marriage comes up. And yet, like on Prop 8, marriage was just the focal point of a bigger issue. That bigger issue in our passage is about the resurrection. Jesus tells us that our marriages are temporary, while telling us that our lives are eternal. So let's look at what this passage has to say about both marriage and the resurrection.

In verse 18 we find the Sadducees approach Jesus. They were also religious leaders of the time. But they had some very specific beliefs. First, they really only cared for the first five books of the Bible, called the Torah, the part recorded by Moses. The other books in the Old Testament they really didn't attach much authority to. So their canon of Scripture was much smaller than the rest of the Jews: 5 books instead of the 39 books of the Old Testament. Second, we learn that they had some other strange views according to Acts 23:8, such as they didn't believe in angels or spirits. Third, we learn here in verse 18 that they did not believe in the resurrection.

And so that is the chief concern raised here in this passage. The Sadducees oppose the belief in the resurrection. They do not believe a bodily resurrection is biblical, according to their smaller canon of Scripture. This was a point of contention they held against the other religious leaders at the time, such as the Pharisees. And so after the Pharisees failed to find fault with Jesus in last week's passage, we now see the Sadducees coming up to Jesus with their own attempt.

They would talk about marriage, but they were really concerned with the resurrection. They hoped to ridicule Jesus, proving their point and advancing their cause, while discrediting Jesus.

And so they come up to Jesus in verse 19 and address him as "Teacher." This is very similar to the last passage where the Pharisees and Herodians addressed Jesus in the same way, while the whole time they were out to get him. It seems a similar motive is again at work.

And so the Sadducees tell Jesus a story. It almost sounds like a parable. They describe the sad story of a woman who can't keep a husband or have a child. Seven husbands, all died off after marrying her (if you were husband 6 or 7 you must have been pretty worried). And of course, their question becomes, if the resurrection actually happens, then whose wife will she be? The assumption of course is that she can't be married to all then in the afterlife, can she?

Their logic here appears to be an attempt at *reductio ad absurdum*. They are trying to argue by way of absurdity. That logic goes like this. The position you want to prove is not true -- you assume for the sake of argument that it is true. Then you show how that assumed truth results in an absurd claim, something recognized by everyone as absurd. The conclusion then is that the initial argument is not true. By the way, this sort of reasoning is not the most solid form of reasoning, because it assumes that if we think something is absurd then that makes it untrue.

So that's what the Sadducees do here. They want to prove the resurrection is wrong. So they assume it's true for the sake of the argument. Then they take an example that would leave some absurd situation in the afterlife - this proposed dilemma that a woman would be stuck with seven husbands, which they conclude is absurd and impossible. And so they conclude that the original premise of the resurrection is incorrect. If the resurrection is correct, they say it would lead to this absurd conclusion, so the resurrection must not exist.

Of course, they try to strengthen their argument by setting this all in the context of the Mosaic Law. Verse 19 describes a provision in the Mosaic Law from Deuteronomy 25:5. The provision is called the "levirate law," from latin *levir*, meaning husband's brother. The levirate law said that if a man died before he had given birth to an heir, then his brother was to marry his wife, and the brother was to bear a child on behalf of his deceased brother. The child born to this new marriage would legally represent the deceased brother - in terms of inheritance and name. The principle here was to preserve the family inheritance and name of the man who died before he could have an heir. Remember the Israelites were all given part of the Promised Land as their inheritance. That inheritance was divided up among all the tribes and families of the Israelites. And so the levirate law protected the inheritance to make sure each Israelite's name and inheritance would pass onto the next generation.

You see the Sadducees are trying to give their hypothetical question biblical legitimacy. They weren't just making up some far-fetched what-if situation that might be morally questionable in and of itself (a woman remarrying seven times). No, this is what God's law required of the Israelites. The Old Testament levirate law was a biblical mandate for them. So they are showing that the Bible required them to have this woman remarry seven times. And so they are trying to make their case biblically. They want to know, if the resurrection is true, what would happen to this woman in the next life who followed this biblical law on remarriage? Who would be her husband?

Well to the Sadducees, maybe their question made perfect sense. Maybe it seemed like an air-tight biblical argument. But Jesus didn't think so. Jesus is going to address both issues here. He's going to address first the issue raised about marriage. Then he's going to address the issue of the resurrection. Verse 25 is where he answers about marriage. In verse 25 he says that in the resurrection, people won't be married. They won't be married or be given in marriage. Instead they will be like the angels in this regard. (By the way, Jesus isn't saying that we'll be like the angels in every respect. He's talking about marriage here. In our resurrected existence we'll be like angels in the sense that angels aren't married.)

So Jesus responds to them at first by showing them they made a wrong assumption. Their attempt to show the absurdity of the resurrection in this situation was inherently flawed. There is no concern about who the woman would be married to, because none of us will be married anymore after we are raised from the dead. Marriage is a life-long commitment, but that commitment doesn't extend beyond the grave into our resurrection life. And so the Sadducees' question proceeded from a false assumption. They assumed people would be married in heaven, and their whole argument of absurdity was based on that bad assumption. There would be no dilemma in heaven for a woman with seven earthly husbands.

But then Jesus turns to make a case to them for the resurrection. And Jesus meets them where they are at on this issue. He doesn't appeal to some of the other Old Testament books that more explicitly talk about the resurrection. Remember, the Sadducees didn't put much stock in those other books. Jesus actually makes his case from the Torah, from Moses himself. This was not something they could disregard.

And so Jesus calls them to remember the passage about Moses and the burning bush (from Exodus 3). How could they not remember that classic passage? Jesus reminds them that God told Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Present tense, not past tense. God didn't say that he was the God of them, but that he *is* the God of them. Jesus interprets that for them: God used the present tense because he is not the God of the dead but of the living! Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob still exist! They are with the Lord, having been spiritually raised from the dead, and awaiting the final bodily resurrection when the Lord returns. And so Jesus makes a simple case for them from the Torah. He used the Bible books that they would accept and shows them how even they testify to the resurrection.

And of course fundamental to these words by God to Moses are relationship. God had related himself to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God was not just God. He was *their* God. They were in relationship together. And what kind of relationship was that? It was a relationship of love and salvation and compassion. For God to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was in light of the covenant he had made first with Abraham and had repeatedly renewed with his sons. That's the covenant that ultimately led to our salvation through Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfilled the Abrahamic covenant. And so whenever God said in the Old Testament that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob it was a reminder of the special relationship God had entered into with his people. It was a reminder of how God was showing his love, and salvation, and compassion to his chosen people. And yet, that would be pretty minimal if it only extended to this life. If God's love and salvation only extended to man's short stay on this earth, that would be a lot less significant. And yet that is not the limit of God's love for his people. It continues on to eternity. There is a resurrection for God's people. And Jesus points to that through these simple words God had spoken: I *am* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living.

At the end of the day, Jesus boils down the Sadducees problem to two issues. Look at verse 24. Jesus says that they are mistaken because of two things: they didn't know the Scriptures and they didn't know the power of God.

Their lacking knowledge of the Scriptures is seen in a few ways in this passage. First, their reference of the levirate law showed how they misinterpreted that passage from Deuteronomy. They thought it presented some dilemma for marriage beyond this life. And yet the very passage they quoted from assumed otherwise. Moses was talking about what to do when the husband *died*. The wife was to be taken by the brother. That would have actually been *unlawful* if the husband hadn't died - that's what Moses said elsewhere in Leviticus 18:16; it was a sin of incest to take your brother's wife. But the levirate law passage they quoted shows that the first marriage had ended, by the death of the husband. That's why a man marrying his deceased brother's wife is okay. It would have been unlawful while the first husband was alive. But it *is* lawful once the brother died. And so this suggested the very opposite of the thing the Sadducees were assuming. They assumed that marriage would continue on into the after-life. That passage showed the finality of the marriage at death. Their attempted misuse of this passage showed a lack of knowing the Scriptures as a whole.

Their lacking knowledge of the Scripture was also seen by Jesus' reference to the burning bush. Jesus made a case for the resurrection from the very books of the Bible they claimed to accept, but obviously hadn't known them well enough to see what Jesus did.

Their lacking knowledge of the Scripture is probably also implied by Jesus' reference to the angels. Remember, the Sadducees didn't believe in angels. But the Torah does refer to angels on several occasions! And so Jesus' mention of angels in verse 25 might be another subtle rebuke to them that they just didn't know their Bibles as they ought. Of course, it might also be a rebuke to them for rejecting all the other books of the Bible that they did. They were acting like teachers, but didn't actually know God's Word.

At the end of the day, they didn't know God's power. They didn't believe that God's power included the resurrection. They had limited God's power in their minds. They had limited God's relationship with them to just their life in this world. Surely God's power is seen in this world. Israel's history testifies to that. The exodus from Egypt and the bringing of God's people to the Promised Land was amazing. But that was just the beginning of God's power. God's relationship with his people looked far beyond the earthly Promised Land with its blessings. It looked forward to a heavenly country, to eternal resurrection life; life full of spiritual blessings that endure. The Sadducees had limited God's power. They thought it extended only to this life. But God's power shown to his people was greater than they realized.

And so I'd like to leave the Sadducees for now. I'd like to leave the Sadducees and their mistaken notions. I'd like to leave their lacking knowledge of Scripture and God's power. And I'd like to turn to think more about what Jesus has taught us here about marriage and about the resurrection. And I'd like to use our thinking about this as a segway to way applying this passage to our lives.

We see in this passage that marriage is temporary - till death do us part. Marriage is something between man and woman in this present age, but not part of our experience in the age to come. Let's face it. That might make some of us sad. Yes, many people today have experienced the bad side of marriage. Many have tasted the horrible taste of divorce. Many have experienced the perversion of marriage because of sin. But many of us have also tasted of the good side of marriage.

Many of us have tasted of the sweetest fellowship between husband and wife in so many different intimate ways. And we have tasted of that in the context of a world affected by sin. Just read the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament. It speaks of the wonders of love and sexuality found in the marriage bond. But as you read the book, you see that sin is involved too. That marriage, as good as it is, is affected by sin. For us who have wonderful marriages, we know that sin is there, don't we? We know that our marriages can be difficult because both the husband and the wife are sinners. And yet for so many of us, our marriages still are the greatest thing that has happened to us apart from our salvation. Marriage can be so wonderful. You can feel closer to that other person in ways that you can hardly imagine. It can seem so heavenly and wonderful, even amidst the trials. And yet Jesus tells us today, that our marriages are temporary. Human marriage is God's institution, an institution that he created "good," and yet it is a temporary institution.

And so if we've tasted something of the goodness of earthly marriages, then this can tempt us to be a bit sad, couldn't it? We could be a bit saddened at first to know that our lifelong spouse won't be our spouse in heaven. And yet Scripture assures us that heaven will be far greater than we can imagine. It promises that our resurrection life will far more wonderful than anything we've experienced on earth.

And so I can't help but think that's the case in terms of marriage. The institution of marriage is such a fundamental aspect of our humanity, that I can't think it's just done away with in heaven. Rather I think it is *fulfilled* in heaven. If our earthly marriages do not continue in heaven it is because what they picture find a greater fulfillment at the resurrection.

And isn't that the *clear* testimony of Scripture? Scripture describes God's people as the bride of Christ. Scripture uses the metaphor of the saved being married to Jesus. Paul says to the Corinthians, "I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2). In Ephesians, Paul talks about how Christ himself is preparing the church as his bride, to be presented to him when he returns. John describes in the book of Revelation the church as the bride of Christ, and promises the coming of the great marriage supper of the lamb for God's people at the resurrection.

Do you see what the Scriptures are promising to us? Something even greater than our human marriages, but something pictured by our human marriages. Human marriage is temporary. In the resurrection, we will not individually be given in marriage to other resurrected humans. But that is because there is an even greater marriage in store for us. So there will be a marriage in the resurrection. We, God's people, as one united church, will be united to Christ. It will be the greatest marriage. One not marred by sin. Because Jesus will have prepared us his bride for that great marriage. On the cross he showed his great love for us, by dying for us. And on the cross he paid for the sins of us, his bride. So that when he returns, he will present to himself a bride who has been made beautiful; sinless, holy, and without blemish. Right now while we await his return, he is preparing us for this great wedding. Not through external beauty treatments and with some earthly gown. But through the robe of his righteousness and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that makes us more and more righteous like Christ. The Spirit that sanctifies us and purifies us from all sin. And when will this wedding happen? On the day of resurrection! On the day when Jesus comes back to earth. That is the day of resurrection and consummation! Let us look forward to that great day!

Saints of God, let us indeed be in preparation for this great wedding of Christ and his church. Let's prepare for it! How can we prepare for it? Well one general way is to keep from the problems that these Sadducees had. Jesus told us that they didn't really know his Word or his power. What was the result for them? Verse 24 and verse 27 - they were mistaken. *Greatly* mistaken. By lacking in their knowledge of God's Word and his power, they ended up in error.

Let's not fall into the same trap that they did. Let's strive to know God's Word better. Let's know his power better. Don't expect to keep from error if you stay away from the truth. And don't expect to be able to guide others to the truth if you stay close to error. No! Let's embrace the truth. Let's embrace the truth of God's Word. And it's that very Word that tells us of God's power. It tells us of his *power* to resurrect the dead, and his *plan* to resurrect the dead. It tells us of God's plan to save us through faith in Jesus Christ, so that when that resurrection does happen, we will be raised to eternal life and not to eternal damnation. You see Scripture says that resurrection is a reality for all. But that is only a good thing for those who belong to Christ. Those who will be united together as his bride for all eternity. And that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Trusting in him as your Lord and Savior and Eternal Husband.

And we can be preparing for this great heavenly marriage even through our earthly marriages. Now singles, I want to remind you that Scripture tells us that singleness is not a bad thing. Our singleness gives us much opportunity to serve God and prepare for his return. But I want to talk for now to those who are married or aspiring to be married. Our earthly marriages can be a *great* thing! Scripture calls you to cultivate those marriages. Scripture calls you to love your spouse, to enjoy your spouse, to delight in your spouse, and to be faithful to your spouse. Just because your earthly marriage is a temporary thing in comparison to eternity, doesn't take away from that command. I think of our sermon last week. We talked about rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. We identified that we belong to two kingdoms - the kingdom of men, which is temporary, and the kingdom of God, which is eternal. But just because the civil governments of this world are temporary, didn't take away from our obligation to submit to those authorities, and honor those authorities, and to serve those authorities. The same is true for our marriages. Just because they are temporary doesn't mean they are not legitimate or important. No, our earthly marriages are so very important. We must cultivate them through time, effort and love. But as you do that, realize the heavenly marriage which you have been called into. Use the growth of your earthly marriage to remind you to be growing in your heavenly marriage. Paul tells us that the only acceptable reason for being separated from your spouse for a time, is when you mutually agree to set aside some time for prayer to God. That should tell us how important it is to be working on growing our earthly marriages, and it should also tell us how important it is to prepare for the consummation of our heavenly marriage.

So let us get excited. As excited as a bride-to-be the night before her wedding; let us get excited for the Lord's return as the resurrection. And as you prepare for this great heavenly marriage, be assured that it is actually Christ preparing you. Even though Jesus is not physically with us at that time, know that he is preparing all things for this great consummation. Jesus said, "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2-3).

That is our hope and joy. That is what makes the resurrection so wonderful. That is why the resurrection will be more wonderful than anything you experience in this life. We will be with Jesus. And for those who've experienced the goodness and

sweetness of earthly marriage, know that that is but a foretaste of being with Jesus for all eternity. And for those who haven't had that experience of earthly marriage, this calls you all the more to long for the Lord's return, where anything that you heart has longed for here and now will be filled and fully satiated with the joy of being with the Lord forever. For all of us, all of our godly hopes and dreams and longings will be fully met in eternity with Jesus. Amen.

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