

Luke 20:27-40
Jesus and the Sadducees

Time is strange to us. When we see someone we have not seen for many years, we exclaim “my how you've changed!” Of course they have. Time has taken its toll. The sensation is even more pronounced with children. If we have not seen someone from, say the ages of 5 to 11, we cannot get over how much they have grown. What did we expect? We simply have a difficult time with time. I think the best explanation for this phenomenon is that man was not made for time, but for eternity.

Here is a more tangible example. The study of world history reveals that there are some things that are culturally universal, and the belief in some kind of life after death is one of them. That is not to say that all cultures through all time have had the *same* belief in life after death, but almost all cultures have some kind of belief in an afterlife. A believer would affirm that such a belief is universal because God “has set eternity” in the heart of man (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Let me give a few examples. The ancient Egyptians used their sacred text, *The Book of the Dead*, to instruct them on how to prepare both the body and the tomb for the afterlife. The ancient Greeks put a coin in the mouth of the corpse so the deceased could pay the ferryman Charon to take them across the river Styx into the underworld. Native American cultures buried their dead with tools and weapons for use in the hereafter, and the Norsemen did the same; their great burial site at Sutton Hoo is an historian's dream - it even included a full sized *drakkar*. And who can forget the immense terracotta statues buried with the first Qin emperor Shi Huangdi.

The Jews were no different. ¹“And He answered and said unto me:

'Hear, Baruch, this word,
And write in the remembrance of your heart all that you shall learn.

²For the earth shall then assuredly restore the dead,
[Which it now receives, in order to preserve them].

It shall make no change in their form,

But as it has received, so shall it restore them,

And as I delivered them unto it, so also shall it raise them” (2 Baruch 50:1-2).



Job reminded his friends,

²⁵“As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,
And at the last He will take His stand on the earth.
²⁶Even after my skin is destroyed,
Yet from my flesh I shall see God;
²⁷Whom I myself shall behold,
And whom my eyes will see and not another” (Job 19:25-27).

And David wrote,

⁹“Therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoices;
My flesh also will dwell securely.
¹⁰For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol;
Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.
¹¹You will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Psalm 16:9-11).

In the passage we are looking at today, Luke recounted a conversation between Jesus and the Sadducees. The Sadducees were an exception to the rule. Though they were Jews, they did not believe in life after death. And they tried to use their position to try to undermine the authority of Jesus and embarrass Him in the presence of the crowds who were following Him. As He had done with the Pharisees, however, Jesus transformed their attack into an opportunity to teach those who would listen truths about God.

The Sadducees Attack

“Now there came to Him some of the Sadducees” (v. 27). The ‘now’ refers to immediately following the attempt of the chief priests and scribes to get Jesus to commit Himself on the issue of taxation. It seems that no sooner had Jesus dispensed with that interruption, than the Sadducees tried their luck. The Sadducees were a sect of the Jewish faith who traced their origin back to Zadok, the high priest under David and Solomon. They differed from the other Jewish sects in that they accepted only the written word. That is, they did not accept as authentic the oral traditions and rabbinic commentary which the Pharisees and others so admired and labored so endlessly to keep.

One of the applications of this thinking, was that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection from the dead. Paul would later use this to his advantage, as it was common knowledge among all Jews and Gentiles.

⁶“But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, ‘brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!’ ⁷As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all” (Acts 23:6-8).

Though they were fewer in number than their rivals, the Pharisees, they were better connected to the Roman powers in Judea and Galilee. They were usually wealthy and held high positions in the temple

bureaucracy, since they had cooperated with the Roman government. It was from the Sadducees that the chief priests were chosen. It was the Sadducees who enjoyed the rich trade in temple sacrifices to which Jesus had put an end. It was the Sadducees who dominated the Sanhedrin. With no belief in the afterlife, they had made the best of this world. That was why they cooperated with Rome. They based salvation on God's blessing in this life as measured by a life of ease and material possessions.

But make no mistake, the Sadducees were not libertines. Instead, the Sadducees were as strict as the Pharisees, perhaps even more so, since they followed the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) exclusively. They allowed no oral tradition to create exceptions to the Law. They had developed no rabbinic tradition of loopholes. They employed no scribes to find inconsistencies and anomalies to exploit. For them, the Mosaic Law alone was authoritative and must be followed exclusively and to the letter.

Since they followed only the Pentateuch, and since there was no reference to the resurrection of the body in the first five books of the Old Testament, it followed that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. They chose to use this particular belief to try to stump Jesus by asking Him a question that would be impossible to answer. They had assumed that His beliefs were the same as those of the Pharisees. It was a special opportunity. They could not only embarrass Jesus, but also show up their rivals, the Pharisees, who had proved themselves unable to befuddle this rabbi.

So ²⁸they questioned Him, saying, 'teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife, and he is childless, his brother should marry the wife and raise up children to his brother. ²⁹Now there were seven brothers; and the first took a wife and died childless; ³⁰and the second ³¹and the third married her; and in the same way all seven died, leaving no children. ³²Finally the woman died also. ³³In the resurrection therefore, which one's wife will she be? For all seven had married her'" (v. 28-33).

They used as their text Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

⁵"When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. ⁶It shall be that the firstborn whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother, so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. ⁷But if the man does not desire to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'my husband's brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel; he is not willing to perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' ⁸Then the elders of his city shall summon him and speak to him. And if he persists and says, 'I do not desire to take her,' ⁹then his brother's wife shall come to him in the sight of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face; and she shall declare, 'thus it is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' ¹⁰In Israel his name shall be called, 'the house of him whose sandal is removed.'"

As peculiar as this command sounds to our modern ears, it was nevertheless a command that God expected to be obeyed.

⁸"Then Judah said to Onan, 'go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.' ⁹Onan knew that the offspring would not

be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother. ¹⁰But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord; so He took his life also" (Genesis 38:8-10).

But the argument made by the Sadducees was a classic example of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Two husbands would have been as useful as seven to make the point. We can be reminded that as believers, we must never underestimate the absurd lengths to which skeptics will go. Unbelievers will rely on anything that will distract from mere Christianity.

Jesus Responds

Perhaps He was becoming frustrated at the constant interruptions while He was trying to proclaim the kingdom of God during the final days before His crucifixion. Perhaps He was just offended at the ridiculous example given by the Sadducees. In either case, Jesus responded directly and, it seemed, with some intensity. As Matthew recorded, Jesus prefaced His answer "you are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matthew 22:29). This was a humbling retort. Jesus looked at the Sadducees and told them they did not understand their own scriptures. It is difficult to imagine a more confrontational rebuke.

Though the question was absurd, the answer was simple. ³⁴Jesus said to them, 'the sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, ³⁵but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; ³⁶for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection'" (v. 34-36).

In other words, there is no marriage in heaven because there is no need for it. Since people do not die, there is no need to replenish the population. Since all are in perfect union with God, there is no need for families. The human institutions so needful in this fallen world have no place in the presence of God. Also, notice that the caution that "those who are considered worthy" was directed right back at the Sadducees. By their own definition they had proved themselves *unworthy*. Since they did not believe in the resurrection, they would not participate in the resurrection to eternal life. Resurrection to eternal life with God was only for "sons of God" and "sons of the resurrection."

But Jesus was not finished. He expounded on His answer, and challenged the belief of the Sadducees that the resurrection was not taught in the Pentateuch. He continued, ³⁷but that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸Now He is not the God of the dead but of the living; for all live to Him" (v. 37-38). Jesus referred the Sadducees directly to the Scriptures they claimed to know so well. He took His example from the heart of the Pentateuch. In that passage, God spoke in the present tense of Himself as being the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is, God was not telling Moses that He used to be their God, but that He currently still was their God. The only explanation consistent with Scripture was that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must be with God in heaven.

This is not the only place in Scripture where God made this statement. When God appeared to Isaac He said,

“I am the God of your father Abraham;
Do not fear, for I am with you.
I will bless you, and multiply your descendants,
For the sake of My servant Abraham” (Genesis 26:24).

For this answer, the Sadducees had no response. However, “³⁹some of the scribes answered and said, ‘teacher, You have spoken well.’ ⁴⁰For they did not have courage to question Him any longer about anything” (v. 39-40). The scribes, perhaps relieved that their rivals had not been able to confound Jesus either, joined in the enthusiasm of the crowd. The Sadducees simply went away.

Takeaways

For us today what do we do with this confrontation. How does it have meaning of us. I think our best use of this passage is to be reminded of, and praise God for, the resurrection to eternal life that all believers will experience.

Both the Old and New Testaments are replete with examples of this promise of God for all who are His. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2).

“²⁸Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, ²⁹and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29)

“³⁵But someone will say, ‘how are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?’
³⁶You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; ³⁷and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else.
³⁸But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. ³⁹All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. ⁴⁰There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. ⁴¹There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. ⁴²So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; ⁴³it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:35-44).

Such passages perhaps raises more questions than they answer, but that is not the point. We must not look too closely into things for which our eyes were not made to see. May God give us grace to praise Him for what we know will come, and trust Him as to the details of how and when.