

Introduction

The late Stephen Hawking, renowned physicist and atheist, famously said in an interview, "There is no heaven. ... That is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark." He died March 14, 2018. His knowledge is more accurate now than when he was alive, and I am sure that he is wishing that hell was a fairy story and that he had believed that heaven was not.

Smart as Hawking was, and as respected as he was for his brilliance, his beliefs about life after death are in the minority. In the United States far more people than not believe that there is life after death. As of 2014, some 70% believed in heaven and some 58% believed in hell. Those who do not believe in life after death are in the minority but their number is substantial.

In the days of Jesus, a particular group of Jews was noted for its belief that there is no afterlife. They were called the Sadducees. Up to the last days of Jesus' life, they were not really troubled by him. However, these were the Jewish elites and largely involved in the service of the Temple. They made their money through the merchants who set up shop on the temple grounds. So when Jesus entered the Temple and drove out the money changers and sacrifice merchants, it got really personal for them. They joined the Pharisees and the Herodians in desiring to have this man out of their hair. After the Pharisees and Herodians failed to discredit Jesus, the Sadducees took their turn.

[Read Text and Pray]

In chapter 22, Matthew accounts for us a barrage of attempts to discredit Jesus. This is the second instance in which his enemies think they have put Jesus in an impossible situation. The Sadducees remarkably were involved in the worship at the Temple; many were priests. They held only to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. Moses was their exclusive scriptural authority. The Sadducees denied the existence of angels, the immortality of the soul, and certainly also the resurrection of the body. They believed you could not argue for these matters from the 5 books of Moses. For them the idea of resurrection was preposterous. And their test question revealed it. They thought their question exposed the absurdity involved with common assumptions about resurrection—apparently one of which was that in the resurrection you would continue to be united in marriage. Yet Jesus does it again. He answers his detractors with truth, and it astounds those who were standing around. The simplest core truth of this text is that Jesus defends and explains the doctrine of the resurrection and thus vindicates himself again. I want you to see Jesus's Rebuke and Jesus's Explanation followed by Jesus's Affirmation.

I. Jesus's Rebuke.

A. The question put to Jesus began with a scenario based upon the law of Moses. And they drew emphatic attention to it. "Teacher, MOSES said . . ." They pointed to the law of Levirate marriage found in Deuteronomy 25:5-6. If a man dies leaving a widow and she has no children, his brother is to marry her and raise up offspring in his brother's name. Now the scenario was this. One of seven brothers married and died without offspring. So the brothers one-by-one marry her with the same result. This woman has been married to seven different men. And now here is the question, for those who believe in a resurrection: "in the resurrection, whose wife will she be?"

B. The initial response of Jesus was to boldly set the record straight. Jesus informed these troublemakers that they were wrong. The rejection by the Sadducees of the resurrection was a blatant error. In issuing correction to the Sadducees, Jesus is in effect affirming the resurrection.

C. And yet Jesus goes further to declare what it was that resulted in their error. They lacked knowledge. He charged them, "you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." The Sadducees were ignorant of the word of God and the power of God. The reason they rejected the truth was because of their lack of knowledge. They knew neither the Scriptures NOR the power of God. They possessed the scriptures and they referred to the scriptures, but they did not know the scriptures. So they knew some of the scriptures but they did not know them as a whole. They were not careful students determined to properly and accurately grasp what God has revealed.

I sat beside a guy on an airplane last week seeking to engage him with the gospel. I was intrigued because as we talked about things he disagreed with, he would ignore the scriptural foundation I would offer. On the other hand when he agreed with the point I was making, he wanted to know the precise verse I was referencing so he could take it and show it to others.

In other words if the scripture served his purpose he was all too ready to have and use it on others, but if it went against his desires and opinions, he brushed it off and refused to give it consideration. That is a willful ignorance. And it is that willful ignorance that Jesus condemns here.

As we think about the Sadducees and Jesus's rebuke of their ignorance of God's word, we should be driven in two ways. First, we should be driven to read it and to study it. If this is THE book which can lead us to eternal life, we—every one of us—should long for and strive after not being ignorant of what it says. We must not hold fast to what we like and brush off what we do not. We must know the whole and know it well. You can't do that if all the Bible you get is from the Sunday morning sermon. You need the word every day. Among your life goals should be to delight yourself in God's word every single day.

Secondly, we should make it our aim to handle and understand God's word rightly. The guy on the plane I mentioned earlier was one of the more challenging prospects I have run into recently. When it fit his cause, he objected on the basis of there being so many interpretations. My reply was that there are certainly many interpretations, but there is only one that is ordained by God and it is my obligation and determination to continually make sure I am understanding the Bible as God intended it to be understood. Paul said it to Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." We must reckon with what Peter states about the Bible: "No prophecy of scripture comes from one's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Now Jesus's rebuke was not only for their lack of knowledge of the scripture but also for their lack of knowledge of the power of God. They did not think highly enough of what God is able to do. They thought little thoughts of God's ability. The idea of creating human beings that could live eternally or be raised to live bodily for eternity was something they could not fathom, so they dismissed it as a possibility. And Jesus said to them, you do not even begin to realize how powerful God is. You do not believe in a resurrection because your thoughts of what he is able to do are constricted; they are diminished. What you see as impossibility is no obstacle for God.

How often are we mistaken because our thoughts of what God can do are minimized? There are some things God cannot do, but they are all things he would not do or could even want to do like sin or lie perform a logical contradiction like making a rock so big he could not move it. But as Paul reminds us, God is able to do exceeding abundantly more than all we ask or even think.

Today people follow in the footsteps of the Sadducees when they buy into the limited reasoning of the world in the arena of science. Secular scientists begin with the assumption that there is no God. They then look at the geological data and determine the formations require billions and billions of years. Some professing Christians come along and assume the scientists are accurate and then start viewing and interpreting the Bible in the light of that lens. They make the mistake of interpreting the scripture by what scientists say instead of interpreting the data in light of the scripture. They set aside the clear intent of the scripture for something that makes more sense to the world. Their assumption is that God could not produce the universe they see in six literal days. Do not allow your understanding of scripture to be impacted by what your mind tells you God can not do. If I have to choose between what God says and what I observe with my eyes or what scientists insist is true, I am sticking with his word. Once I lean on my own understanding, I may doubt the power of God and become like the Sadducees.

Maybe you buy what the scripture says and you say you believe every word. But what do you do when you are disappointed with your life's circumstances; your hopes and dreams are dashed? Or how do you respond when you are threatened? Your job hangs in the balance . . . you have an ominous diagnosis . . . a storm is headed your way? Don't be like the Sadducees, don't underestimate the power of God. Believe God who gives you his promises, that he WILL make ALL THINGS work together for good for those who love him and are the called according to his purpose. He IS able to do exceeding abundantly beyond ALL we can ask or think. Look, there is more than one devastating effect of underestimating the power of God. First, you minimize God and second, you expose yourself to all kinds of uncertainty that leads to worry and anxiety and fear. We need to know the power of God for his own name's sake and for our own peace of mind.

Psalm 96 calls us to praise the Lord for his power. "Oh sing to the Lord, all the earth! Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among the peoples! For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary."

Jeremiah prayed, "Ah Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm! NOTHING is too hard for you!"

The angel assured Mary the mother of Jesus when explaining how she, a virgin, would bear a son. He declared, "Nothing will be impossible with God!" Listen, let us be far from the influence of the Sadducees! Our God is great. He is able. He can do anything he chooses. Trust in him. Rest in Him and give glory to his name.

II. Jesus' s Explanation.

A. In responding to the question posed by the Sadducees, Jesus sheds some light on the nature of the resurrection. In the resurrection, our bodies will be somewhat different than we are now. Specifically, we will be like the angels in that there will be no marriage. We will be sexless. There will no longer be procreation. And our relations between each other will not be affected by gender distinctions.

For Jesus says, "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven." So whose wife will the woman be who was married to seven different men? Nobody's.

Practically speaking some of you may be saying, "I can't imagine not being married!" I am with you on that. But here is the fact. Marital intimacy will be replaced by a closeness and fulfillment in heaven that far exceeds the best marriage ever known to man and woman. There will in effect be one marriage and that is the marriage between Christ and his people. Our marital intimacy now will be incomparably superceded by the consummation of our relationship with Jesus. It will be better than anything we have known here; it will be so deep, so rich, so satisfying, and so exhilarating that we can only imagine its gratification. "For now we see in a glass darkly but then face to face!" What a hope for Christ's people!

B. The second aspect of Jesus's explanation is remarkable as well. The Sadducees quoted Moses. Back in verse 24, they came to Jesus saying, "Teacher, Moses said . . ." Moses was the authority for the Sadducees. They excluded all scripture but the five books of Moses. And so they quote Moses. Jesus raises the bar. He asks, "Have you never read what was said to you by God?"

This is significant! Have you not read what was SAID . . . TO YOU . . . BY GOD. God speaks to people. You may never have heard his voice and it is likely that you never will this side of heaven, but God has spoken. When we read his word, he speaks. Do not downplay the essence of the scripture. God used human instruments, but it is God's speech. And he speaks TO US! Do not neglect to read the Bible. And realize that when you do, you are hearing God speak. And if you do not read, it does not change that God has spoken, and you are responsible for what he has said. Jesus holds these Sadducees responsible. And he holds us responsible as well. If you honestly believe that the God who created the universe speaks in the Bible, why would you not consume vast portions of it on a constant basis. Would you like to have been there when God spoke at Sinai or when God talked with Adam and Eve or when he spoke to Noah or Abraham or David or Elijah or when the Father said to the Jesus, "This is my beloved Son"? Then why won't you open your Bible day and night?

So Jesus quotes God. And from where does this quote come? Ah, my friends, it comes . . . from the Pentateuch! When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, this is the way he introduced himself (Ex 3:6), "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Jesus refers to the portion of the scripture that was respected by the Sadducees to show them their failure. He then explains that the Lord is not the God of the dead but of the living. The Lord did not say, "I was Abraham's God and then Isaac's God and then Jacob's God." He remains the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because these men remain. They still are. Their deaths did not bring about the end of their existence. They are still alive even though their bodies have long since decayed.

Again, I want you to notice the basis upon which Jesus makes his case. Jesus himself refers to the scripture to prove the point. He treats the scripture as possessing full authority. The scripture is the source from which our understandings must be derived. It is the basis upon which you and I must know and assert what is true. If Jesus himself refers to the Bible as the unmistakable source of truth, how much more should we. There is no other source with divine authority. If somebody questions why you base your understanding of truth upon the Bible, all you have to say is, "if it is good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me." And if they wonder about all the different interpretations, just tell them that the one that matters is the one that lets the Bible speak for itself.

Be sure that you are not imposing your ideas upon the scripture but that the Bible is placing its ideas upon you.

III. Jesus's Affirmation.

We can't leave this text without getting to the issue at the heart of the question and the answer. And that is resurrection. Jesus teaches that there is a resurrection. It is of a body. Even those who are dead who belong to God remain alive. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were dead. Their bodies had decayed, but Jesus says that they are living still. He also points to a future resurrection. He stated, "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage." There is a resurrection age. This is the hope for believers in Christ. Our resurrection is when we will be glorified and when we will be whole. It is when we will see Christ face to face.

The theology of resurrection is expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. He explains that the bodies in which we now live are perishable and the glory of our heavenly bodies is of a different kind than our earthly bodies. Our heavenly bodies will be raised imperishable and powerful. As we bore Adam's image, we will bear the image of Christ. In that imperishable state we will inherit the kingdom of God. The resurrection involves a sudden change by which the perishable puts on the imperishable. The mortal body puts on immortality and death is swallowed up in victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. In this hope we were saved.

But the resurrection is not only a hope for those who trust in Christ. It is also a threat to those who do not. Jesus taught that both good AND evil will be raised from the dead. John records that Jesus forewarned, "an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29).

Resurrection will insure that people have bodies fit for their eternal condition and circumstances. Those who rise to life in the kingdom of God will possess glorious bodies without spot or wrinkle or any inhibition to joy perfectly fit to look upon their glorious savior and glorify and enjoy him forever. Those who rise to judgment will have bodies fit for enduring eternal torment and destruction in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The smoke of their torment will go up forever and ever, and there will be no rest day or night. Where do you want to be? I have to assume it would be in the new heavens and the new earth. The only way there is the way of conversion to Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ, the god/man lived in perfect obedience to God's law and died as though he had broken every one of God's laws millions and millions of times. He became sin who knew no sin so that we who believe might become the righteousness of God in him. Those who will be raised to the kingdom of God in that day are those who while in their perishable body have turned against their own sin and have trusted in the finished work of Christ upon the cross and in his victorious resurrection from the dead. If you have yet to follow Christ, please hear his call and turn to him this morning.

Conclusion

The Sadducees were wrong. And so was Stephen Hawking. Heaven is not a fairy story for those who are afraid of the dark. Heaven is the place where the redeemed of the Lord will forever live to say so. It is the hope for which we have been saved. Our great fear is not the dark but being in the

darkness and separated from our glorious King and Savior and from the God who created the heavens and the earth and made us in his image.

In fact, the resurrection of the dead is what makes our lives worth living. It is in the light of the resurrection that Paul exhorts us, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Prayer

Benediction

May God, who raises the dead and gives life to our mortal bodies through his Spirit, strengthen and solidify our hope so that we may labor with steadfastness, abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in Him it is not in vain.