

To Seek and to Save the Lost

Sadducees Ask About the Resurrection

Luke 20:27-40

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Scripture

Jesus is in his final week of life, which we call the “passion week.” After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus returned to the temple on Monday and drove out the merchants who were selling their wares and obscuring people’s access to God. This enraged the religious rulers, who then engaged in several controversies with Jesus. Commentator Darrell Bock says, “The Pharisees and others in the leadership have had their chance to upset Jesus: they have challenged his authority (20:1–8) and tried to trap him politically (20:20–26). Luke now relates a third controversy during the passion week, in which the Sadducees try their hand at tripping up Jesus on an internal Jewish dispute over the resurrection.”¹

Let’s read about the Sadducees asking Jesus about the resurrection in Luke 20:27-40:

²⁷ There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, ²⁸ and they asked him a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. ³⁰ And the second ³¹ and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. ³² Afterward the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.”

³⁴ And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, ³⁵ but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, ³⁶ for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1616.

of the resurrection. ³⁷ But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. ³⁸ Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him." ³⁹ Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." ⁴⁰ For they no longer dared to ask him any question. (Luke 20:27-40)

Introduction

John MacArthur writes the following:

Anticipation of life after death is universal in the human race. Throughout history people in every culture have expressed confident hope that death is not the end of their existence, revealing that God has universally "set eternity in their heart" (Eccl. 3:11). For example, reflecting the ancient Egyptians' belief in life after death, the Book of the Dead contains stories and instructions related to their belief in the afterlife. A solar barge (to be used for transportation in the next life) found in the tomb of Pharaoh Cheops, who died about twenty-five hundred years before Christ was born, reflects that belief. Ancient Greeks sometimes placed a coin in the mouth of a corpse to pay the deceased person's fare across the mystic river of death into the land of resurrection life. Some American Indians buried their dead warriors with useful items (such as their bows, arrows, and horses) that they might need in the next life. The Vikings did similarly. In Greenland, children were sometimes buried with dogs to guide them through the cold wasteland of death. As a young man, Benjamin Franklin (though not a Christian in the biblical sense) composed the following whimsical epitaph:

The Body of
B. Franklin, Printer
Like the Cover of an old Book,
Its Contents torn out,
And stript of its Lettering & Gilding,
Lies here, Food for Worms.
But the Work shall not be lost,

For it will, as he believ'd,
Appear once more,
In a new and more elegant Edition,
Corrected and improved
By the Author²

As God revealed truth to his people, they came to understand that there is indeed life after death. This is stated in a number of biblical passages.

For example, Job expressed his confident hope in his physical resurrection from the dead in Job 19:25-27, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another."

David wrote of his hope in the resurrection in Psalm 16:9-11:

⁹Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
my flesh also dwells secure.

¹⁰For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.

¹¹You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Sheol is a "Hebrew term of uncertain etymology. In ordinary usage it means ravine, chasm, underworld, or world of the dead. In the Old Testament it is the place where the dead have their abode, a hollow space underneath the earth where the dead are gathered in."³

Psalm 49:15 also expresses the psalmist's hope in the resurrection, "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me."

So does Psalm 139:8, "If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I

² MacArthur, John F (2014-10-01). Luke 18-24 MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (p. 140). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1948.

make my bed in Sheol, you are there!”

Daniel 12:2 is one of the clearest Old Testament passages about the hope of the resurrection life, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

And, of course, there are other Old Testament passages that speak of the hope of the resurrection (i.e., Psalm 73:24, Isaiah 26:19).

However, not all people in Jesus’ day believed in life after death. The most notable group that did not believe in the resurrection was the Sadducees. They believed that both body and soul ceased to exist when a person died. So they came to confront Jesus with an absurd question about the resurrection.

Lesson

The question about the resurrection in Luke 20:27-40 teaches us that there is indeed a resurrection.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Approach of the Sadducees (20:27)
2. The Absurdity of the Resurrection (20:28-33)
3. The Answer of Jesus (20:34-38)
4. The Astonishment of the Crowd (20:39-40)

I. The Approach of the Sadducees (20:27)

First, let’s look at the approach of the Sadducees.

Luke said in verse 27 that **there came to Jesus some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection.**

As I mentioned earlier, the Sadducees did not believe in life after death. In this view they differed with the Pharisees, another religious group during the time of Jesus. Luke noted that difference in Acts 23:8, “For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.” The Pharisees acknowledged the resurrection, angels, and spirits (i.e., demons), but

the Sadducees rejected them all.

Well, who were the Sadducees? John MacArthur writes:

Although few in number, the Sadducees wielded immense influence, because they consisted of the aristocratic, wealthy, and influential religionists, including the high priests, the chief priests (cf. 19:47; 20:1, 19), and most of the Sanhedrin. Holding all the positions of power over the temple compensated for the Sadducees' relatively small number.

Politically, they were eager to cooperate with Rome. Since they rejected any existence after this life, the Sadducees focused all their efforts and attention on the affairs of this present life. They pursued power, wealth, position, and control. If obtaining those things required them to cooperate with their Roman overlords, they were zealous to flatter them.

The Sadducees ran the lucrative business operations located on the temple grounds, and were obviously furious with Jesus for twice disrupting their business. . . . Jesus' assault on the theology of the Pharisees and the economics of the Sadducees caused those who were separated by their beliefs to unite in hating Him.

In terms of their religious beliefs, the Sadducees . . . held to the primacy of the Mosaic Law, contained in the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). All the rest of the Old Testament, they believed, was subordinate to the Mosaic Law, and merely commentary on it. They argued that nowhere in those five books is the resurrection taught, and therefore any writing – even another Old Testament book – that appeared to teach the resurrection must be understood in a different way.

Consistent with their denial of any future life, the Sadducees lived life as if there were no tomorrow. They fastidiously observed the Mosaic Law, but at the same time, like the Pharisees, cruelly oppressed the common people, and used their positions of power and influence to indulge themselves at the expense of the populace.⁴

Earlier, the Pharisees tried to destroy Jesus by trapping him into making an anti-Roman statement about taxes (cf. Luke 20:19-26).

⁴ MacArthur, John F (2014-10-01). Luke 18-24 MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (pp. 143-144). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

Now, the Sadducees were trying to destroy Jesus by discrediting him in the eyes of the people. They wanted to ridicule the idea of the resurrection by asking him a question about marriage relationships in the afterlife. Their question was designed to make belief in the resurrection appear absurd.

II. The Absurdity of the Resurrection (20:28-33)

Second, notice the absurdity of the resurrection.

So the Sadducees **asked Jesus a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother”** (20:28). This example may seem strange to us because we are unfamiliar with a custom at that time, known as “levirate marriage.” The law concerning levirate marriage is found in Deuteronomy 25:5-6, which states, “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. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.” The purpose of levirate marriage was to keep the family name from dying out, and also to keep the family property intact.

The Sadducees began their question by introducing levirate marriage. They granted then, for argument’s sake, the issue of the resurrection. So, they asked their question, **“Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife”** (20:29-33).

This question was presumably often used by the Sadducees, especially against the resurrection-believing Pharisees. It was a bizarre scenario designed to embarrass and silence them. So, they were eager

to see Jesus embarrassed and silenced as well.

Commentator Kent Hughes shows us the dilemma the Sadducees posed to Jesus:

Assuming the presupposition that life in the resurrection is an exact counterpart to earthly life, the resurrected woman would be guilty of sevenfold incest – exponential and eternal carnality! Or if not, she must arbitrarily be designated the wife of one of the brothers. But which one? Or (and this is the answer the Sadducees hoped for) the entire notion of the resurrection must be absurd. As they waited in smug satisfaction, little did they suspect that they had met the supreme mind of the cosmos, the source of all truth.⁵

III. The Answer of Jesus (20:34-38)

Third, observe the answer of Jesus.

Jesus' answer contains several truths about the resurrection that I would like to enumerate.

First, there is no marriage in the resurrection. And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage” (20:34-35). In Jesus' day some Jews believed that the resurrection was an extension of this life. Of course, for the believer it was an extension of the good life, and the delights would be multiplied in the resurrection. John MacArthur notes that “some Pharisees even argued that people would be resurrected in the same clothes in which they were buried, with the same physical defects, and the same interpersonal relationships.”⁶ But Jesus made it clear that marriage is part of this age and that there is no marriage in the resurrection.

For some people who are in a bad marriage, that may seem like

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 273–274.

⁶ MacArthur, John F (2014-10-01). *Luke 18-24 MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (p. 143). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

good news. However, for most of us who love our wives and are in a happy marriage, that may seem like bad news. But the good news is that in the resurrection we will love each other perfectly! In fact, we will love everyone perfectly.

Second, there is no death in the resurrection. Jesus said of those in the resurrection in verse 36a, **“for they cannot die anymore.”** One reason marriage is necessary in this age is for the purpose of procreation. Yes, marriage is also for the purpose of companionship and for purity. But in the resurrection we will be perfect companions and pure. And since we will not die anymore, there is no necessity for procreation. Because there is no death in the resurrection, no one will ever attend a funeral. That will be wonderful!

Third, we will be like angels in the resurrection. Jesus said of those in the resurrection in verse 36b, **“because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.”** It is important to note that people do not become angels when they die. When a person dies people often say things about the deceased person that is simply not true. One of those things is that the deceased person has become an angel. Jesus never said that and the Bible never teaches anywhere that when a person dies he or she becomes an angel. What Jesus did say is that believers who die **“are equal to angels.”**

Believers who die are **sons of the resurrection.** The term **sons** in this instance includes male and female. The Bible sometimes uses **sons** when referring to male and female because the inheritance in those days went to the sons. Anyway, believers who die are **sons** and daughters **of the resurrection** and are the **sons** and daughters **of God** because of faith in Jesus Christ. Believers who die are **equal to angels.**

In what sense will we be equal to angels? We will be equal to angels in beauty and strength. Our bodies will have powers of which we now have no conception. We will have vastly improved mental capacities and a greater spiritual depth. We will love and worship and serve God with single devotion. We will be filled with inexpressible

joy that will spill over into every relationship we have in the resurrection. And, like the angels, we will never sin.

And fourth, the resurrection was taught by Moses in the Pentateuch. The Sadducees believed that Moses did not teach the resurrection. Jesus could have gone to many places in the Old Testament to show the truth about the resurrection. But, he masterfully took them to the Pentateuch to show them that even Moses taught the resurrection. Jesus said in verses 37-38, **“But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.”**

Jesus was reminding the Sadducees of Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush, where God said to Moses in Exodus 3:6, “I am [present tense] the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” This statement would make no sense if Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were no longer alive. If someone said to you, “I knew your father,” that indicates that your father may be dead or that there was a change in the relationship. However, if someone said to you, “I know your father,” that indicates the existence of your father and also the ongoing relationship. Similarly, God did not say, “I *was* the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Rather, he said, “I *am* the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” God was declaring not only Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’s ongoing existence but also his ongoing relationship with them. Or, to put it differently, if Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were nothing but dust, God could not now be their God. But he was, and he is!

Jesus powerfully used Moses to teach the Sadducees that there is indeed a resurrection.

IV. The Astonishment of the Crowd (20:39-40)

Finally, notice the astonishment of the crowd.

Luke said that **some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you**

have spoken well” (20:39). The **scribes** were Pharisees, and they were delighted that Jesus answered the question of the Sadducees so well, and humiliated them in the process.

The Sadducees for their part were utterly silenced, and **they no longer dared to ask him any question** (20:40).

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the question about the resurrection in Luke 20:20-27, we should make sure of our eternal destiny.

The Bible actually teaches that all people will be resurrected. Some will be resurrected to “to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). In our text today Jesus is of course addressing the issue of being resurrected to everlasting life.

How can anyone be sure of being resurrected to everlasting life? Jesus once said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25). That was a bold statement. But it was backed up by what actually happened. In just a few days after his controversy with the Sadducees Jesus himself died on the cross. And three days later God the Father resurrected his Son. The same God who raised his Son back to life is able to raise you and me as well.

Believe that Jesus is the sinless Son of God. Believe that he paid the penalty for your sin. Believe that his perfect life is credited to your account. And then turn from your sin.

If you do that, then you too may have assurance of being a son or daughter of the resurrection. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, Jesus taught us about the reality of the resurrection. We live in a day in which there is so much misunderstanding about life after death. People believe that they become angels or stars or some new creature.

However, the truth is that there really is a resurrection.

For some it will be a resurrection to everlasting life, and for others it will be to shame and everlasting contempt. Oh God, will you turn each person to yourself in faith and repentance so that he or she will indeed be resurrected to everlasting life.

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!