

The First Resurrection

Mark 12:18-27

For a number of Sundays now we have observed that after King Jesus arrived at Jerusalem, bathed in the cheers of the crowd, He faced opposition. In Mark 11:15-17, the workers in the temple had made God's house into a money tree for the Jews – instead of a house of prayer for all the nations. And so Jesus drove them out of the temple. In Mark 11:27-28, Jesus was opposed by the chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders, who did not think for a second that King Jesus had as much authority as they did. In Mark 12:13-15, the opponents of Christ were the Pharisees and Herodians, who tried to get Jesus in trouble with either the Jewish people or the Roman authorities – depending upon how He answered their question. All of Christ's opponents failed miserably. And now the Sadducees enter into the story for the first time in Mark's Gospel.

They not only wanted to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the crowd, they also wanted to disgrace the Pharisees, who were more popular than the Sadducees – even though the Sadducees had more money and more political clout. The question, or conundrum the Sadducees had devised was designed to attack a common belief held by both Jesus and the Pharisees. That common belief was in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees did not think that life after death was a Biblical truth – largely because they only believed the first five books of the Bible were authoritative. This is why their challenge to Jesus comes from a command found in the book of Deuteronomy. Their question is recorded in Mark

12:18-19,

“Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ¹⁹ ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother.’”

In the ears of 21st century people, this sounds very strange. But the command does appear in **Deuteronomy 25:5-6**,

“If brothers [Jewish brothers] are living together [on property that is divided among them] and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. ⁶ The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.”

What seems very odd has an important reason behind it. To discover that reason we need to go back to the book of Genesis and specifically to the time of Jacob and his twelve sons. Let’s listen to **Genesis 38:6-10**, which focuses on Jacob’s son Judah,

“Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷ But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the LORD’S sight; so the LORD put him to death [Er’s wickedness was more than just the average, run-of-the-mill wickedness]. ⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, ‘Lie with your brother’s wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother.’ ⁹ But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he lay with his brother’s wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother. ¹⁰ What he did was wicked in the LORD’s sight; so he put him to death also.”

Because Judah had lost two sons shortly after they married Tamar, he decided not to risk a third, so he lied to Tamar, promising that he would give her his younger son Shelah as a husband – after he got a little older.

As the years passed, Tamar realized that Judah had no intention of doing that. And so after Judah's wife died, Tamar put a veil over her face, pretended to be a prostitute, easily seduced Judah and got pregnant by him. She bore him twin sons, Perez and Zerah. This spiritual train wreck was caused by Judah's refusal to have his son Shelah marry Tamar, according to the law of Levirate marriage.

But there is still another piece of information we need in order to understand why God established Levirate marriages among the Israelites – and it is found in Genesis 49:10. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Jacob foretold that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah. And in Matthew 1:3, guess who is in Christ's genealogy? Perez, the son of Judah, born from Tamar. God gave the Levirate marriage law to the Israelites in order to keep the tribes of Israel separate, until Christ was born of the tribe of Judah. Now that this prophecy has been fulfilled, that law has served its purpose and is obsolete. All of the Ceremonial Laws were directed to Israel and connected to Christ. When the Bible says that Christians are not under the law, it is the Ceremonial Law that is in view. It would be hard for me to emphasize enough how important it is for Christians to understand that truth.

The Sadducees had no problem with the Levirate marriage law because it came from the books they believed in. What they had trouble with is the notion of life after death. It amazes me that at the time of Christ, many if not most of Israel's priests were Sadducees, who believed that when we die, not only do our bodies return to the dust, but our spirits also cease to

exist. This is why they were Sad-you-see? I had to say that because Ray Lidecka would have been heart-broken if I didn't. If there is no life after death, then God is only the God of living people. Which means for mankind, there is no heaven and there is no hell. So we might as well eat, drink and be merry – for death ends everything. That is the logical conclusion of what most of the priests of Israel believed at the time of Christ.

Let's now look at the supposed enigma that the Sadducees believed would prove that life after death is a ridiculous notion. It is laid out in verses 20-23,

“Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. ²¹ The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. ²² In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. ²³ At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”

The Pharisees, who also believed in the resurrection, taught that the woman would be the wife of her first husband. **But both the Sadducees and the Pharisees were wrong.** The Sadducees were wrong because they did not believe in life after death. The Pharisees were wrong because they believed that life after death would follow the same pattern as life here on earth, which includes marriage and having children.

Let's pause and think something through. One of the reasons why God commanded mankind to be fruitful and multiply is because man was not made physically immortal. Adam and Eve had an opportunity to live forever by eating from the tree of life, but they lost that opportunity

through disobedience to God. If mankind was not to become extinct, we needed to marry and have children. However, according to I Corinthians 15:51-53 and Revelation 21:3-4, at the time of the bodily resurrection, all believers will receive glorified bodies that never get sick, old, or die – which means people in glorified bodies will never become extinct.

Another reason God established marriage is stated in **Genesis 2:18**, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Marriage was also necessary because of man’s aloneness problem here on earth. There will not be an aloneness problem when we die and go to the Father’s house in heaven. Nor will there be an aloneness problem when we are in our glorified bodies on the New Earth. Why? Because both in our intermediate state in heaven and in our glorified bodies on the New Earth, we will all be able to perfectly love God and perfectly love our neighbor. There will no longer be an aloneness problem. It is hard to imagine how wonderful that will be. Let’s listen to Jesus’ response to the Sadducees in vv 24-25,

“Jesus replied, ‘Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? ²⁵ When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven [who are immortal]. ²⁶ Now about the dead rising – have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? ²⁷ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!’”

At this point I need ask you – have Abraham, Isaac and Jacob already experienced bodily resurrections? No. They have experienced the first

resurrection, but not the second resurrection. In order to understand the first resurrection we need to go back to the Garden of Eden. Please listen carefully: The first death spoken of in the Bible is not physical death. God commanded Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – and told him the consequence if he did, “for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” We all know that Adam and Eve ate of that tree, but they did not die physically that day. They died spiritually, which means they immediately fell out of fellowship with God. It was only God’s grace that spared them from immediately dying physically as well. If they had died physically, while being spiritually dead, they would have experienced eternal separation from God. Instead, God prolonged their physical lives, and provided substitution for their sin. Animals were killed and the nakedness of Adam and Eve was covered with the skins of those animals. When Adam and Eve trusted in God’s provision for their sins, their fellowship with God was restored, even though they still had to face physical death. In other words, Adam and Eve temporarily lost the opportunity for physical immortality.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes the condition of people before salvation and after salvation in **Ephesians 2:1-5**,

“As for you, you were dead [spiritually] in your transgressions and sins . . . ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.”

The bottom line is that the first death Adam and Eve experienced was spiritual death. The first resurrection they experienced was spiritual

resurrection. And the life they gained because of their spiritual resurrection, did not end when they physically died. The Bible says that when the spirit of a believer leaves the body [which is what happens at death] it will be immediately ushered into the presence of the Lord. This was true in Old Testament times and in New Testament times.

In Exodus 3:6, when Moses spoke with God at the burning bush – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had all experienced physical death – hundreds of years before Moses was born. But God said to Moses, “**I am** the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” If the Sadducees were right, then God should have said, “I used to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But when they died, that ended everything.”

Let me repeat, that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have a home in heaven, but they have not yet received resurrected, glorified bodies. When does that happen? Let’s listen to a few passages in the Gospel of John that address this issue. In **John 6:40**, Jesus states,

“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life [which we enter into the moment we believe], and I will raise him up [in a glorified body] on the last day.”

It is my understanding that the **last day** Jesus is referring to, is the last day of this New Covenant Age, when Christ will come to raise the dead and usher in the New Heaven and New Earth. It is called the last day, because that is when the Eternal State begins and time will be no more. The only people who will be on the New Earth, are people in glorified bodies. However, according to the Bible – all people who have ever lived

will be raised on the **last day**. I say that because of what Jesus teaches in

John 5:28-29,

“Do not be amazed at this, for an hour is coming when **all who are in their graves** will hear his voice²⁹ and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”

For believers, our bodily resurrection is our second resurrection. For unbelievers, it is their only resurrection. Let me state again that those of us who have experienced the first resurrection [salvation], do not escape physical death, but we will overcome physical death through the bodily resurrection. Both of these resurrections are spoken of in Christ’s conversation with Martha, after her brother Lazarus had died. Listen to

John 11:21-26,

“‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.’²³ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’²⁴ Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day’ [Jesus now explains to Martha that people do not need to wait until the bodily resurrection – in order to experience life after death].²⁵ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die [never lose their fellowship and life with God, which began at salvation and grows even deeper upon physical death] . . .’”

The Apostle John is the only one who recorded this conversation between Christ and Martha. None of the other Gospels have it. And it was the Apostle John who was privileged to see the reality of Christ’s words to Martha. It happened after John had been banished to Island of Patmos because of his faith in Christ. In this vision, recorded in

Revelation 20:4-6, John was allowed to see what was going on in heaven while he was in banishment on the island of Patmos,

“ . . . And I saw the souls [the spirits] of those who had been beheaded [killed] because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God, and . . . they lived [exactly as Jesus had promised Martha] and reigned with Christ a thousand years [In this context I believe the thousand years is referring from the time of Christ’s ascension into heaven – all the way to His coming to raise the dead at the end of this New Covenant Age. But Mark, it has already been 2,000 years since Christ’s ascension. Yes, but in the book of Revelation the numbers 1,000 and 144,000 should not be pressed for literalness. Even the Psalmist says that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills. I trust we all realize that there are a lot more than a thousand hills on planet earth and God owns the cattle on all of them. In the Bible, sometimes the number thousand just means a whole lot].⁵ (The rest of the dead [referring to unbelievers] did not come to life until the thousand years were ended) [If I am understanding this properly, the bodily resurrection, which will occur at Christ’s bodily return, is the only resurrection unbelievers will ever experience. But that resurrection will not spare them from the lake of fire. In contrast, the spirits of believers, which John saw alive in heaven, do not need to fear the lake of fire because they have experienced spiritual resurrection. Notice what John says next]. This is the first resurrection.⁶ Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death [the lake of fire] has no power over them”

All genuine believers experience the first resurrection the moment we are saved. And when we die, our spirit separates from our body and we are immediately ushered into God’s presence. But what is John referring to when he speaks about believers in heaven reigning with Christ? Jesus already spoke of this in **Revelation 3:21**,

“To him who overcomes [is faithful to the Lord until death], I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”

I don't pray to angels or departed saints, but I believe that both groups are very active in heaven, carrying out responsibilities that help to extend Christ's Kingdom here on earth. This vision John received concerning what believers are doing in heaven, is another nail in the coffin of the Sadducees' false teaching that death ends everything. That is ridiculous. The saints in heaven have never been more alive.

How are these truths to effect our lives right now? I would say that because we, as God's people, have so much to look forward to – for all eternity, we can afford to be generous now. Generous with our time, our talents and our finances in serving others and in making Christ known. God works through followers of Christ to change peoples' lives both now and for all eternity.

Long ago, when I was 20 years old and not married, if someone had come up to me and said, "Mark, I have an important job that has to be done. If you will sign up and work for me, it will require you and the rest of my crew to work 18 hours a day for the next three months. You will be working in shifts, so I can give you a day off every week. However, I will not lie to you, this will be hard, sweaty, exhausting work. But if you sign on and help me complete this momentarily important task, I will pay you a million dollars a year for the rest of your life. Are you interested?" I would have said, "Sign me up!"

Friends, Jesus told us back in Mark 10:29-30,

"I tell you the truth . . . no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age . . . and in the

age to come, eternal life.””

I don't know about you, but I think what Christ offers is such a great deal, that the only sane thing for a Christian to do, is to tell Jesus, “Sign me up. I will do it – if You promise to be with me.” And of course Jesus has. And so we should start everyday by telling Jesus, “I am Yours. Body and soul. What do You want me to do today?” And for fathers and mothers of infants and toddlers, changing diapers will be involved in God's work for you. Let's Pray