

It is worth noting at this point, that when Jesus said this to the Sadducees, it meant that once in heaven, all they had said about levirate marriage would be irrelevant, for 'they will not marry or give away in marriage.' Issues of inheritance would be immaterial, and all remembrance of God's people would be held for eternity in heaven!

The reality for us is that Jesus does not say that married people will somehow be 'unmarried' in heaven. We must remember Jesus' own words about marriage which are themselves built upon Genesis 1:27; 'a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh; they are no longer two, but one flesh. What God has joined together, let no-one separate!' (Mark 10:8,9). Putting all this together, those who are married will indeed enjoy eternity with each other, and this text does not suggest otherwise. This powerful and wonderful fact does not explain how or why people sometimes have to go through much trouble to find the true godly union which these words speak of, and some never find even though they have been formally married. It does, however, set before us the clear purpose of God for men and women which, despite the problems, is the experience of many thousands of people. We can be assured that God does not intend to separate what He has joined!

Application

This surprisingly strange passage comes from the attempts of people to catch Jesus out and play games with the great promises of God. Unfortunately, many still try to do the same today, as fashions for Biblical analysis and criticism wax and wane, and scholars insist upon treating the Bible as no more than an ancient literary text. The miracle is that out of this rather stilted, silly and blind challenge by the Sadducees, Jesus took the opportunity to say one or two things about Scripture and about the Resurrection. His argument about God being the God of the living not the dead is frankly irrefutable, for if God is the one who has created and built the world in love, then it is virtually illogical for a group of God's own people to argue that His work is meaningless. Certainly, unless there is a resurrection in which what we experience now becomes perfected in ways we can barely imagine, then this world itself is meaningless!

It is possible to hear all kinds of views expressed about the after-life even within the church, and it certainly feels as if some people prefer their own culturally dependent opinions about what heaven will be like, to what the Bible clearly says. One thing is certainly clear, which is that the Bible always describes God as being both at the very heart and centre of His heaven and also everywhere within it. It is an experience of God which is exciting and incredible to anticipate, and whilst we hold and treasure all that God has given us in this world, the next will be gloriously superior. We will find this to be true if we keep close to our Lord now, throughout the life He has given us.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, read through Deuteronomy 25:5-10, and discuss whether the Sadducees were entitled to make of it what they did.
2. Discuss what you believe you have learned about the resurrection from this study. What do you look forward to in the resurrection?
3. What do you imagine it will be like when we are 'like angels'? How different from this life do you imagine it will be?

Discipleship

We are following a series of discipleship disciplines in which we write down in a notebook or diary what we think Jesus must have felt, given that he was going to his own death and resurrection. As you do this, remember that the Sadducees denied the very thing Jesus would experience which would demonstrate the power of God over death! They struck at the heart of God's saving work, and it must have pained Jesus to deal with this perversion of Scripture.

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, bless us as we place our trust in You both now and in our future. As we have heard about the heaven which awaits us, let us have faith in what You have promised and confidence that You will one day greet us in the heavenly places with excitement and joy! Grant us peace and security now, and in our eternal future: AMEN

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father; we praise and honour You because of Your constant love. Where we fail to understand what You are doing for us, break into the enclosed worlds we create around us and liberate us into Your glorious Kingdom. Teach us show to live not according to the limitations of our time and place, but by Your greater plan for us in which we are set free and our great potential is fulfilled. Praise You for Your love, dear Lord: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Streets

Pray today for those who plan the streets, roads and pathways in our countries. Many of these originally come from natural pathways created in the past, but others are planned and built as part of the rapid growth of our countries and economies. Pray for a genuine sense of responsibility amongst planners for human need, for the environment, and for the good of all.

Meditation

Those who love the Lord need have no fear:

- They live within a community of people who care;
And their lives will not be eternally forgotten.
- They treat what they possess as a gift from the Lord;
Blessings from heaven to be returned to God.
- They give their wealth freely without thought for themselves;
For they love to do what is right before God.
- They need never be afraid to receive bad news;
For their hearts are set firm, secure in the Lord.
- They bring light to the world in the midst of darkness;
The gifts of the Spirit make them shine like the sun.
- They know that when beset by life's trials and evil;
Nothing can remove the love of their Saviour.
- They do not expect an easy life in this world;
For the treasures they have are secured in heaven.

Those who love the Lord may live in peace.

Bible Study - Mark 12:18-27

¹⁸ The Sadducees, who say that there is no resurrection, came to Him and posed Him a question; ¹⁹ 'Teacher,' they said, 'Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no child, the man must take the widow and raise up descendants for his brother. ²⁰ Now there were seven brothers; the first married a wife, and died leaving no children. ²¹ The second took her, and died leaving no children; and the third likewise. ²² Eventually, all seven brothers left no children; and lastly the woman died as well. ²³ At the resurrection (when they rise again) whose wife will she be, since all seven were married to her?' ²⁴ Jesus replied, 'Is this not the reason you are wrong, that you do not either know the Scriptures or the power of God? ²⁵ For when they rise from the dead, they will not marry or give away in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ²⁶ As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God spoke to him and said, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? ²⁷ He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You have been greatly misled.'

Review

In the previous story, some Pharisees and Herodians accosted Jesus and asked Him a trick question in order to try and pin Him down; they failed miserably! Eager to prove themselves against Jesus were the Sadducees, who believed they had a question Jesus could not answer. The question was one they had placed before the Pharisees on many occasions, and they could not answer it; it was a question about the resurrection of the dead, concerning the obscure ancient practice of 'levirate marriage' (see Deut. 25:5f.). Jesus did not answer the question directly, just as He had not answered the previous question about paying taxes to Caesar (see 12:14-17), but His reply destroyed the Sadducees' question. In replying, Jesus also gave a tantalising glimpse of the Resurrection (12:25).

The question put to Jesus in this passage is one that was discussed by Jewish people at the time of Christ precisely because it was a 'proof text' used by people who wanted to disprove any belief in the resurrection. The Sadducees were the champions of such beliefs and they rejected any notion of an 'after-life'; but in contrast, the Pharisees and a growing number of people in Israel were beginning to believe that God would 'raise people up' after death to be with Him. The Sadducees therefore posed this question (12:19-23) to try and tie Jesus up in this relatively intellectual debate.

The question itself is derived from Deuteronomy 25:5f., which dealt with what should happen if a man died before he could produce a child who would be his heir. In ancient thought, a man lived on through his own children and in the memory of his descendants, so it was a terrible tragedy if he had no children. Childlessness was therefore sufficient grounds to break the normal Scriptural ban on a man marrying his brother's wife (see Leviticus 18:16). It also meant that in the circumstances of a man's death before an heir was born, the brother of the dead man had to 'take' the widow (see 12:19,21) and produce children by her who would preserve the dead man's family line; this is what is meant by 'levirate marriage'. This same law of Moses performed a social service, because the widow of the dead man would consequently be taken into the wider family of the brother, and he would provide for her, even though she was not his 'first' wife.

In the light of all this, it does not take much thought to see how the Sadducees could construct the picture painted in their question. The idea of seven brothers each marrying the same woman under the same circumstances of the death of another brother was simply an old oriental device for exaggerating the facts in order to make a point. Mark did not even waste time telling the whole story of each of the seven who died! The final question is obvious; 'At the resurrection ... whose wife will she be?'

Jesus' did not answer the question directly, but He exposed the fallacy behind it in two different ways. When He said; 'you do not either know the Scriptures or the power of God', this was equivalent to accusing them of both using Scripture incorrectly, and also of losing touch with the very God they claimed to worship! He went on to tell the Sadducees flatly that there was a resurrection (12:23) and that when it happened, God would remake people to be 'like angels' and there would be no more need to get married!

Later in the study we will explore what being 'like angels' might mean. We will also look at the fact that Jesus did not say people in heaven were not married, but rather, there was no more need to get married in heaven. There is a subtle but important difference here! Finally, Jesus went to the heart of the matter, and challenged the Sadducees to accept that Scripture did indeed speak about life after death, in fact, God had spoken about this directly to Moses! (12:26,27). There is much to explore, but Jesus would have no truck with intellectual nonsense.

Going Deeper

It is relatively easy for us to understand the question posed by the Sadducees even if we do not fully understand how and why they used it. Jesus' reply does, however, require us to be careful and look rather more closely at what was said. We can agree with Jesus that Scripture and He were in agreement about the fact of the resurrection, but what did Jesus really say about marriage in heaven? And what does it mean for us to be 'like angels'?

Some background to the question

We will start by exploring some more about the Sadducees, and how and why they came and asked Jesus this question. It was a well rehearsed theological conundrum which the Sadducees frequently used as a means of trying to prove to the Pharisees that any kind of belief in the

resurrection was, as they understood it, unscriptural. The ancient beliefs of the people of Israel which are reflected in most of the Old Testament are that when people died, they entered a dreaded state of near 'non-existence' in an underworld called 'sheol' which was separated from God because it was thought of as located under the earth and the heavens. The Sadducees held firmly to this tradition.

However, at the time of the Jewish revolt against Greek rule at the time of Judas Maccabeus, 160 years before Christ, many Jews were martyred in the violent uprising, and people began to feel that God must surely have something more for His people after death. They found assistance in this belief from various sacred writings including Psalm 22:30 ('posterity will serve Him, future generations will be told about the Lord') and Job 19:5 9 ('I know that my redeemer lives and that at the last, He will stand upon the earth ...'). The Pharisees accepted this and believed in a life beyond death in the presence of God, but the Sadducees were 'old fashioned', and in addition, they only accepted the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) as being true 'Scripture'. For this reason, they would not accept that any Psalm or the scroll of Job (as quoted above) or even any quote from the prophets held any value in determining the purposes of God. So for them, the resurrection was not scriptural, and the example of levirate marriage they quoted to Jesus (12:19-23) proved that the whole idea of resurrection was nonsense. They simply did not believe that Jesus could fault their argument, and hoped to force Him to agree that the idea of the resurrection was nonsense!

What can we learn about the resurrection from this text?

Jesus was having none of it, and he reduced the Sadducees' riddle to the meaningless conundrum it was in several ways, some of which we do not spot. Firstly, when Deuteronomy 25:5f. describes levirate marriage, it says that the purpose of this marriage is to 'raise up' children (Deut. 25:6 and Mark 12:19 – see above) who will be heirs of the family line. In Greek, as in Aramaic and Hebrew, the words used for 'raise up' ('anistemi' in Greek, a verb) and for 'resurrection' ('anastasis' in Greek, a noun) are different forms of the same word! When Jesus said so clearly that there was a resurrection (12:23-27), He challenged the Sadducees to believe that the power of God was indeed greater than human regulations. The Sadducees' notion of the 'raising up' of the memory of one who had died was a mere shadow of the greater resurrection God had awaiting those whom He chose to save. Jesus knew that He was about to experience death and resurrection, and that the power of God was at work through this in a way which was far greater than anything any human being had witnessed before.

Now, what does it mean that those who are raised will be 'like angels'? If we take this passage by itself and read it in the light of how the Old Testament speaks about angels, then this means that those who are raised will be re-created as spiritual beings whose delight is to serve God (as with the angels who spoke to Abraham on mount Moriah – Gen 22:11; or the angel who ministered to Elijah in the desert – 1 Kings 19:5). This fits very well with what Paul says in his letters about what happens to the faithful after the resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15, he says; 'How are the dead raised? ... There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies and the glory of the heavenly is one thing and the glory of the earthly is another ...so it is with the resurrection ... (the body) is sown a physical body, but is raised a spiritual body' (1 Cor. 15:35,40,42,44). There are no extensive and easy descriptions of what heaven will be like in the Bible, but it seems that it will be like the world which we experience now, but spiritual and not physical, and therefore perfect. The problems people might have with saying that we will be 'like angels' is usually more to do with unscriptural assumptions about what angels are than with what Scripture actually says.

Can we be married in heaven

It is easy to make wrong assumptions about marriage and heaven from this text. Some will quickly, but incorrectly assume that the text says that in heaven, marriage is not recognised or does not exist! We must look carefully at what Jesus says. His words are; 'when they rise from the dead, they will not marry or give away in marriage.' (12:25) In other words, once in heaven, getting married will not be something that happens; just as in the famous saying often quoted from the Talmud (commentaries written after the time of Christ on how the rabbis interpreted God's laws); 'In the world to come there is no eating or drinking or marrying or envy or hate; but the pious will rest with crowns upon their heads, and are satisfied with the glory of God!'