

Luke's Gospel Questions – resurrection & David's son

[Please note: English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction and reading

It was my privilege to give the previous talk in this series on Luke's Gospel, so today we pick up where I left off then, and look at the last 21 verses of Luke chapter 20.

Before I start to make any comments at all, let's read the entire passage, from verse 27 to the end of the chapter:

"There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, 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. 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 all seven had her as wife.'

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, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. 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.' Then some of the scribes answered, 'Teacher, you have spoken well.' For they no longer dared to ask him any question.

But he said to them, 'How can they say that the Christ is David's son? For David himself says in the Book of Psalms,

"The Lord said to my Lord,
'Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.'"

David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?'

And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour

widows' houses and for a pretence make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

We can divide this passage into three sections. Much the largest of these, verses 27 to 40, deals with the resurrection of the dead. The second section, verses 41 to 44, is about Christ as the son of David, and finally verses 45 to 47 contain a very strongly worded warning against the religious leaders of the day.

In fact these three sections address three questions, three vitally important questions, questions which need to be faced by every one of us, because our eternal destiny may well rest upon how we answer them. These questions, which I'm going to use as headings for today's talk, are (1) what happens after death? (2) who do I believe Jesus really is? and (3) where do I look for authoritative guidance and advice?

What happens after death?

Firstly, then, we consider the hugely important question of what happens after death. In the verses immediately preceding today's passage, the Lord was approached by a group of what we might call undercover agents, trying to trap Him with a loaded question about paying taxes. That group was made up partly of Pharisees. But here, in the first part of today's passage, He is approached instead by a group of Sadducees.

We learn from Acts 23 verse 6 that the Jewish ruling council was composed of members of these two rival factions, Pharisees and Sadducees, and we frequently encounter both groups as we read through the Gospels. The same passage in Acts tells us that the Sadducees did not believe in three things, whereas the Pharisees did believe in them. These three things were angels, spirits and the resurrection of the dead.

It was about resurrection that they came to the Lord Jesus on this occasion, hoping, as the Pharisees before them had hoped, that they could trip Him up with a trick question which He would not be able to answer. Like some today who set out to score points in theological discussions, these men attacked not what the Bible actually teaches, but a half understood version of it. They supposed that, if there is a resurrection, then life after death must continue just as it was before, and they therefore constructed a rather implausible story to show the absurdity of this distorted version of the truth.

There is a classic American musical film called "Seven brides for seven brothers." The Sadducees made up what I call the story of "One bride for seven brothers." To grasp the idea behind this, you need first to understand the rule, given in the law of Moses, about what was supposed to happen if a man died childless.

A deeply treasured idea in the Old Testament system, set out in the law which God gave through Moses, was the idea of your inheritance. Your inheritance was the tract of land allocated to each man in Israel, in the immediate aftermath of the conquest of the promised land^{1,2}. The idea was that the inheritance, once allocated, would be passed down from father to son, although a provision was also made for the case that a man had daughters but no sons³.

The memory of the initial holder of the land was viewed as being preserved down through all the successive generations of that man's descendants. The unthinkable was for his name to be "blotted out" or forgotten, so what was to happen in the event that a man died leaving neither sons nor daughters? This question is answered in Deuteronomy chapter 25: 5-6.

“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 scenario, therefore, which the Sadducees described, whilst extremely improbable, was technically possible. And since the picture they paint of this woman, as it were, waking up in the afterlife and wondering to which of these seven men she is supposed to be married, seems so ludicrous, they simply dismiss the idea that there is any afterlife at all.

I do wonder how many of today's atheists and materialists, who confidently assert "when I die, that's the end!" or something similar, have thought through their convictions any more thoroughly than had these Sadducees.

We need to study carefully the Lord's reply, because it doesn't just dispose of their argument. It contains other important teaching as well, so let's look in detail at verses 34 to 36. The Lord deals with the question raised by the Sadducees by distinguishing between two ages, "this age", in verse 34, and "that age" or "the age to come", as the NIV renders it, in verse 35. It is clear from His explanation that the present state of affairs is not going to go on for ever. A new, and very different, age is on its way, and some of us, by the way, are convinced that it is not very far off!

Marriage is a great and precious gift of God. For the Christian it is possessed of a wonderful spiritual significance which transcends the natural relationship, in that it is modelled on, and is a picture of, the divine and eternal relationship which exists between Christ and His church⁴. But, precious as it is, it is something which belongs to "this age" only, and will not continue beyond the grave. The entire basis of the Sadducees' argument therefore collapses and nothing more needs to be said about it.

But the Lord's reply goes well beyond what it was necessary to say in order to dismiss the Sadducees' ill-considered question. For a start, He indicates that not everyone will attain to this coming age. Only some will qualify to enjoy it. Yet the general teaching of Scripture is that, as Paul says in Acts 24 verse 15, "There will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust." The common lot of man is summarised in Hebrews 9 verse 27: "...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement...". The Bible is quite clear. Death is not the end, not for anyone.

So how do we understand the Lord's words here (in v.35): "those who are considered worthy to attain to...the resurrection from the dead"? The clue is in the precise meaning of the words translated "resurrection from the dead." A more exact translation is "resurrection out of the dead" or perhaps "resurrection out from amongst the dead." The Lord is here introducing the idea that, whilst everyone who has died will be raised, not all the dead will be raised at the same time. There will be resurrection phase 1 and then later there will be resurrection phase 2.

This is all spelled out very explicitly in the book of Revelation chapter 20, which specifically speaks, in verses 5 and 6, of "the first resurrection", but I believe that Paul, in the great resurrection chapter, 1st Corinthians chapter 15: 22-24a, is also referring to this when he says that the resurrection will take place "each (person) in his own order (or rank)." Here is the quotation:

"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end...."

The word translated order is a military term meaning a company or rank. He says that Christ is the first of these ranks, the second rank will be those who belong to Him at His coming and the third rank (what Revelation 20 verse 6 calls "the rest of the dead") is implied by the words "then comes the end."

The question we all must face is whether or not we are amongst those the Lord describes as “considered worthy” to have part in that first resurrection. Notice that He didn’t say “those who are worthy.” If that were the qualification it would rule us all out. But if we have come as penitent sinners and received the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour, we will be considered worthy, on the basis of His death on the cross.

Whatever you do, make sure you are not left to take part in the second resurrection, because, as the later part of Revelation chapter 20 reveals, that is a resurrection for one thing only – the final judgement at the great white throne of God.

Verse 36 expands further on the remarkable privilege which marks those who participate in the first resurrection. Death has no further claim on them, and they are described here as “sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.”

Having much more than answered the question brought by the Sadducees, the Lord goes on to further drive home how unambiguously the Bible does indeed teach the truth that we do not cease to exist when we die. He speaks of “the passage about the bush.” That is the incident, recorded in chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Exodus, in which Moses, out in the fields looking after his father in law’s sheep, goes to investigate a bush which is on fire and yet is not being consumed by the flames. God speaks to Moses out of the bush, introducing Himself as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. The Lord points out that God would not have spoken to Moses in this way about these three patriarchs, all of whom had long since departed this earthly life, had they not still been known to Him as living persons.

This section concludes with the reaction of the scribes to what the Lord had said. The scripture tells us that they complimented Him on how He had answered the Sadducees (“Teacher, you have spoken well”) because they didn’t dare to ask Him anything else. What exactly does this mean? Were they genuine in what they said, impressed at His knowledge of the scriptures and how He had refuted the argument of the Sadducees? Somehow, I suspect, especially in view of what He had to say about them in the third section of the passage, that they were motivated more by envy than by genuine respect. They were supposed to be the teachers, not this itinerant preacher from the provinces. I think they were hoping, by making a flattering comment, that they would get the Lord to draw the discourse to a close, thus lowering the spiritual temperature of the conversation and making their own spiritual poverty less obvious.

Who do I believe Jesus really is?

If this was their aim, then it failed, because the Lord had more to say. We now move on to the second of the three questions I referred to at the beginning: “Who do I believe Jesus really is?”

The Lord puts to His hearers what they would certainly see as a conundrum. He quotes the first verse of Psalm 110, and asks them, in the light of what it says, how the Christ can be the Son of David. It was beyond dispute that the promised Anointed One, that is the Messiah (the Hebrew word) or the Christ (the Greek word) would be the Son of David. God had very clearly promised to David that Israel’s rightful king would always be one of his sons^{5,6}, but there is abundant testimony running through the Old Testament, and in particular the prophetic books, that ultimately One will come who will be far more than simply a great King of Israel. One of the best known examples of this is the following passage from Isaiah, so often read at Christmas time (Isaiah 9:6-7).

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”

So what is the conundrum? It is that, certainly to the patriarchal mind of that day, it was inconceivable for a man to call one of his own descendants “my Lord”, which is what David does, clearly referring to the Messiah, in Psalm 110. The Lord says nothing to resolve the mystery, but simply lays down the challenge that it might stimulate sincere souls amongst His hearers and draw them towards the glorious truth which lies behind it.

How, then, is the riddle to be solved? One of the titles ascribed by Isaiah to the One whose birth he predicts in the passage just quoted, is “Mighty God”, and herein lies the resolution of the conundrum. If God should see fit to step down into His creation, taking humanity upon Himself and becoming one of us, then it becomes possible to see how at one and the same time He could be both the Son of David, by being born into a family amongst David’s descendants, and yet also, because of who He eternally is, David’s Lord.

And this is exactly what the Bible says did indeed happen, when God the Son, one of the three persons of the Godhead as revealed in the Bible, was born into the family of Joseph and Mary who, as demonstrated in both this Gospel and that by Matthew, could trace their ancestry back to King David.

The conundrum which the Lord Jesus put forward, to all who were listening but including of course those supposedly learned scribes, who were the recognised experts in the exposition of the scriptures, was not just an interesting intellectual puzzle. The consideration of it led not only to the amazing truth that God had become a Man, but also to the shocking discovery that the very Man in question was the One standing before them on that day.

At the very end of the Bible, in the concluding verses of Revelation chapter 22, is a beautiful summing up of this great mystery, the resolution of the riddle the Lord had posed (Rev. 22:16).

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

Before we move on to consider the third of these three vital questions, let me ask each of my listeners today, the question the Lord Jesus Himself once asked His disciples (Matthew 16:15).

“But who do you say that I am?”

Where do I look for authoritative guidance and advice?

Finally, we come to the question as to where I go for authoritative guidance and advice. In this final section of today’s passage, the Lord Jesus warns His disciples to steer clear of the scribes. These were the acknowledged experts in the interpretation and application of what we today call the Old Testament scriptures. So to be warned against them in such strong terms would be a shocking thing to their ears.

And this was not a quiet word of warning given to the disciples in private. It was a stinging public rebuke. Verse 45 says that it was given in the hearing of all the people.

It is important to see that the Lord was not necessarily discounting the teaching of the scribes. In Matthew 23 verse 2 He spoke of them as having “sat down in Moses’ seat.” That is to say, they were in a sense the successors to Moses in that they supplied the word of God to the people.

This was a day long before the invention of printing. All books had to be copied by hand, and the scribes preserved and copied the scriptures. Insofar as they (and the Pharisees, who are linked with them in Matthew 23) passed on the scriptures without embellishing them, then what they said was to be heeded⁷.

The issue was not what the scribes said. It was what they did. They were an outstanding example of not practising what you preach, of those who “talked the talk”, but spectacularly did not “walk the walk” that went with it. They were, as the Lord spells out here, only interested in their own social standing, in the way they were the objects of public acclaim. They cared only about themselves, not the God they professedly served.

In our day we need to make sure that anyone to whom we look up as a Christian leader, anyone perhaps whose teaching we find helpful or inspiring, passes the test the Lord Jesus told us to apply: “You will recognise them by their fruits.”⁸ But the thought I would like to leave you with is that there is only one infallible source of teaching and only one infallible Teacher. That source is the Bible, and that Teacher is the Holy Spirit. Whoever else you listen to, make sure that you listen first and foremost to the Bible itself.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk entitled “Questions – resurrection and David’s Son”, in our series on Luke’s Gospel, talk number T1193.

¹Num. 32:33 – 42 ²Josh. 14:1 – 19:51 ³Num. 27:1-8 ⁴Eph. 5:25-32 ⁵2 Sam. 7:16 ⁶1 Kings 9:5
⁷Matt. 23:3 ⁸Matt. 7:16

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