

**Resurrection Question**  
**Mark 12:18-27**  
**ABC 3/17/24**

Today we come to the 4<sup>th</sup> controversy Jesus has in the temple with various religious leaders, all of which highlight Jesus' authority as the Messiah. It's also the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 3 questions raised by different Jewish groups. While the question about paying taxes to Caesar (12:13–17) was raised by the Pharisees & Herodians, this one about the resurrection was raised by Sadducees, who differed from the Pharisees in their view of the resurrection. The next one will be raised by an expert in the law (12:28–34). The controversies then climax with a question by Jesus (12:35–37), which delights the crowd. In today's text (12:18-27) the Sadducees try to discredit Jesus' belief in the resurrection & His authority as a teacher with a question about multiple marriages & the resurrection. Jesus responds by pointing out their ignorance of the Scriptures & of the power of God. Jesus then shows that Scripture confirms God's continuing relationship with the patriarchs after their deaths & so proves the reality of resurrection life. **18-27**

**1. Sadducees** Before we get into the text, this is the only appearance of the Sadducees in Mark's gospel & not much is known of them. They were a political/religious party & were the main rivals of the Pharisees. Their origin is uncertain, but they probably arose from the priestly aristocracy during the Hasmonean dynasty (140-37 BC). None of the Sadducees' writings exist today. What we know comes from their opponents & rivals & is found in the gospels & Acts, Josephus, & later rabbinic writings. Josephus describes the Sadducees as well-educated men, men who held positions of power & prominence in the city of Jerusalem. They were the party of the upper classes, not the party of the people.<sup>1</sup> Josephus wrote: *The Sadducees ... are, even among themselves, rather boorish in their behavior, & in their intercourse with their peers are as rude as aliens.*<sup>2</sup> While Pharisees believed in the resurrection, the final judgment, & the immortality of the soul, the Sadducees denied all of these (Acts 23:6–10). While Pharisees accepted all the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the oral *traditions of the fathers*, the Sadducees accepted only the Pentateuch as

<sup>1</sup> Josephus, Life 2 §10–12; J.W. 2.8.14 §§162–66; Ant. 13.5.9 §171–72; 13.10.6 §293–98; 18.1.4 §§16–17

<sup>2</sup> *Jewish War*, II, 8.14

Scripture. Luke also tells us the Sadducees denied the resurrection (Acts 4:2; 23:6–8) & adds they didn't believe in angels either (23:8). Go figure, they cherry-picked what they wanted to believe because angels are mentioned several times in the Pentateuch.

It isn't surprising that Jesus came into conflict with the Pharisees & experts in the law in Galilee, where they were the most influential, while opposition from the high priest, the Sanhedrin, & the Sadducees intensified when He was in Jerusalem. Like the Herodians & the Jewish aristocracy in general, the Sadducees were conservative politically & pro-Roman, supporting the status quo. As priestly aristocrats, they weren't looking for a Messiah who'd come & free them from their Roman masters. With the destruction of the temple & the Jewish state in 70 AD, their power base was gone & the Sadducees disappeared from history. Here in the week before Jesus' death, they joined with the Pharisees as Jesus was a common enemy & they thought they could trip Him up with a question.

## **2. Background 18-19**

The Sadducees address Jesus as **Teacher** because of His popular reputation but they have no desire to learn from Him. While the goal of the Pharisees & Herodians was to trap Jesus (12:15), the Sadducees want to humiliate & discredit Him by showing that belief in the resurrection is illogical & absurd. They come to Jesus with a theological conundrum, a puzzle they'd created about the resurrection. It was a question that was designed to produce ridicule, along the lines of the question people sometimes ask, *Can God make a rock too big for Him to lift?* Their question was more biblical than that because it's a question that has some basis in the Scripture because it references the instruction Moses gave in Dt 25 (5-10), which required that if a man dies childless, his brother was to marry his widow. It was known as the levirate law or marriage, from the Latin word *levir*, which means *brother-in-law*. The widow's brother-in-law would marry her to give her protection & to raise children for his deceased brother & ensuring the family line would continue. The law is illustrated in Gen 38:8-10 where Onan is judged by God for failing to fulfill his duty & in Ruth where Boaz marries her after a closer relative declines to do so. It's one of those odd laws of the OT that we find difficult to understand & relate to, but a law the Sadducees could use to develop

a hypothetical situation they thought would be problematic for someone who believed in the resurrection.

### **3. Story & Question 20–23**

The Sadducees had probably concocted this story to confound the Pharisees & had had some success with it because they approached Jesus & asked Him thinking they'd stump Him too.<sup>3</sup> They propose a hypothetical situation where a woman in turn marries 6 brothers of her 1<sup>st</sup> husband to raise an heir, but each dies before producing children. They conclude by asking whose wife she will be in the resurrection. Their point is that the whole belief in the resurrection is absurd since it leads to ridiculously complex marital situations in the afterlife. **In the resurrection** is shorthand for the end-time resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, & eternal life with God (Lk 14:14; Jn 11:25; Acts 17:32; 23:6, 8; 24:15; 26:8). The resurrection isn't a major doctrine in the OT, but is seen in Dan 12:1–2: **At that time ... Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace & everlasting contempt.** Though this is the most explicit statement, several other passages allude to the resurrection (Job 19:26; Ps 16:9–11; Is 25:7–8; 26:19; Hos 13:14). Most Jews of Jesus' day believed in a future resurrection, but not the Sadducees.

The story appears to be based loosely on the story of Sarah in the apocryphal book of Tobit. This woman marries 7 husbands one by one, all kinsmen (Tob 7:11), but each is killed by a demon before the marriage is consummated (3:7–8; 6:14–15). Sarah eventually marries Tobias, son of another relative, who survives the wedding night through prayer & by repelling the demon with the help of the angel Raphael (8:1–18). The stories are different in terms of purpose, but both include the death of 7 husbands in the context of levirate marriage. The Sadducees tell their story & ask their question & wait eagerly for Jesus' dumbfounded response.

### **4. Answer 24**

Jesus' answer to the Pharisees & Herodians about paying taxes to Caesar was clever; this one is direct & corrective. The Sadducees had 2 problems & the problem wasn't with the resurrection but

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<sup>3</sup> Josephus says the Sadducees loved to debate the resurrection, even though their view was unpopular with the wider Jewish population (*Ant.* 18.1.4 §16).

with their understanding of the resurrection. They didn't know what they were talking about. They were ignorant of the Bible &, as a result, they'd invented a problem that didn't exist. As Jesus says, **You do not understand the Scriptures.** That's the reason for their problem because the Scriptures teach the resurrection. He's saying, *If you study & believe the Scriptures, you'd understand these things.* But further, they didn't understand **the power of God**, who is capable of raising the dead. Jesus addresses their 2 mistakes in reverse order.

**A. Ignorance of God's Power** They are misled concerning the power of God because resurrection life will be more than a simple continuation of earthly life. It will be a new kind of immortal glorified existence, like that of the angels in heaven (25). They are misled concerning the Scriptures because even the Pentateuch, which the Sadducees accepted as authoritative, teaches the continuing existence of God's servants after death (26–27). **25**

Jesus says that marriage is an institution of the present world, not the world to come. Rabbinic Judaism similarly affirmed that *in the world to come there is no ... propagation.*<sup>4</sup> God's power will bring about a completely new form of existence with the resurrection. The life to come is **NOT** going to be like this present life. There will be no marriage as we know it. Instead, people will be **like angels in heaven.** Notice that Jesus didn't say that believers become angels at death, a misconception sometimes promoted in popular culture. In the biblical worldview, God created human beings & angels as different kinds of beings with different functions & destinies (Heb 1:7, 14; 2:5–9). He does say humans become **like angels.** What does that mean? Simply having similar glory & immortality. Jesus says what holds true in this world doesn't hold in the world to come. It's going to be a completely different order. Then we will be like angels in that we'll be eternal. & since marriage is for the preserving & propagating of the race, there'll be no need for marriage in heaven. Perhaps Jesus' reference to angels here is a further challenge to the Sadducee's belief, since they didn't believe in angels (Acts 23:8). Yet angels appear in the Pentateuch, which the Sadducees viewed as authoritative (Gen 16:7; 19:1; 21:17; 22:11; 28:12; Exod 3:2; 14:19; 23:20; 33:2; Num 22:23). Like I said, *go figure!* There a lot like people today who pick & choose what parts

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<sup>4</sup> *Babylonian Talmud, Ber. 17a*

of the Bible they believe. The truth is the Bible doesn't say a lot about what we're going to be like in heaven & what we're going to experience there. It says very little about the resurrection life other than there will be one. It's hard to build a definitive theology around this one point Jesus makes. The reason for that is very understandable. It's because we don't have the capability to understand what that future life is going to be like. Trying to explain heaven & the resurrection & the world to come is a little like trying to explain the internet or mobile phones to people from 1,000 years ago. Our capacity to understand heavenly things is restricted by our earthly limitations. How can we understand what we've never seen, what we've never experienced? We can't. But we believe it because God says it. Paul prayed that God's people would know **what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe** (Eph 1:19a). We need to know & trust our powerful God.

**B. Ignorance of God's Word** Jesus now turns to His 2<sup>nd</sup> charge, that the Sadducees don't know the Scriptures (2:25;12:10). Although the Sadducees are Israel's leaders, they've failed to understand God's revelation. **26-27**

Many things are true that we can't comprehend. Do I understand how God created everything out of nothing? No, but I believe it. The only way we'll arrive at an understanding of them, even a shallow understanding of them, which is the best we'll have in this life, is by revelation. God must tell us what He knows to be true but what we can't see or hear or understand because it's beyond us. He does that through His revelation & we receive it by faith. His revelation is the Word of God, so we must be students of the Word of God. Every believer should strive with all his might to have a sound knowledge of the Word of God, lest we hear the same rebuke from Jesus: *You are mistaken because you do not know the Word of God.*<sup>5</sup> The Sadducees weren't men of faith but were rationalists. They didn't rely on God's revelation. They relied on their reason & thinking. Because of this, they didn't understand the power of God & they didn't understand the Scriptures. But that didn't keep Jesus from quoting Scripture to them. He doesn't avoid the Scriptures because they're skeptical of it. He goes right to the Word of God because there's nothing more effective than the

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<sup>5</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, p 312

Word of God in dealing with men. Jesus could have appealed to any number of passages in the Prophets or the Writings (Dan 12:1–2). But since the Sadducees only viewed the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 books of Moses as authoritative, He points to a text in the Pentateuch. He identifies it as the passage **about the bush** in the **book of Moses** (Ex 3:1–22). Before the introduction of chapters & vss, which aren't divinely inspired but are helpful in locating things, passages were often identified by their theme or content.<sup>6</sup> The **book of Moses** could mean the Pentateuch generally (Gen to Dt), as in the expression **Moses & the Prophets** (Lk 16:29, 31; 24:27, 44), or the primary book about Moses's life, Exodus. Jesus directs them to Ex 3:6, where the resurrection is clearly implied. He goes to a portion of Scripture which the Sadducees said they held as authoritative to show it taught the very doctrine they denied, the resurrection. It's a well-known passage. It's the passage in which God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush & tells Moses to go back to Egypt, where He was to lead His people out of slavery. When God speaks to Moses, He introduces Himself by identifying Himself with the words, **I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God Isaac, & the God of Jacob** (Ex 3:6). It's sometimes said that Jesus makes His argument based on the tense of a verb, a present rather than a past tense: God **is** rather than *was* the God of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob. While true, there's more to it than that. Jesus' point seems to be based on the reality of a continuing relationship with God by His covenant with them. He remains their God even after their physical death because of the abiding nature of His covenant with them. If they died & ceased to exist, as the Sadducees believed, He couldn't still be their God. If Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob are nothing more than dust, God cannot now, at this moment, be their God. God is not the God of that which has ceased to be.<sup>7</sup> By saying, *I am their God*, He's saying I'm presently their God, which indicates they still exist. The resurrection is implied in the words of Jesus when He says that He is the God of the living & not of the dead & that His power is such that it's greater than death. It can overcome the grave. God is that great. God is that powerful. If God is the God of the living, & since God said, long after the death of the patriarchs, that he is their God, then they must be alive & resurrection is

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<sup>6</sup> RT France, *Mark*, p 475 (cf Rom 11:2)

<sup>7</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, vol. 2, p 109

coming!<sup>8</sup> The emphasis is on the words **Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob**, which were intended to remind Moses of the covenant God had made with the patriarchs. Earlier, in Exodus 2, when the Israelites were groaning under the toil of their slavery, we read that God heard their groaning & remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob. That covenant He'd made with them was an unconditional covenant & it had many promises, among them the promise that the land of Canaan would be the possession of God's people, of Abraham's descendants. In Gen 15 He'd told Abraham that his descendants would go into a foreign land & they would be slaves there for 400 years & that He'd bring them back at the end of that time, & they'd possess the land of Canaan. As we come to the book of Exodus, that's what God is preparing to do & that's what He does & that's what Exodus is about. But He'd made that promise of land to Abraham & repeated that promise to Isaac & to Jacob. Back in Gen 13 Abraham & Lot had a dispute & separated. Abraham, being a man of faith & a generous man, gave Lot the 1<sup>st</sup> choice of location. Lot, being a man whose heart & eyes were on the earth, chose the lush green valley of Sodom, & he moved there. That left Abraham with the more barren areas of the land of Canaan. As he stood there alone, without much, without anything, God speaks to him & tells him to look to the north, look to the south, look to the east, look to the west & then walk throughout the land, the length & the breadth of it. For, He says, **all the land which you see, I will give it to you & to your descendants forever** (Gen 13:15). When did Abraham receive that land? He didn't. In fact, the only land Abraham owned was a plot that he bought for a grave for his wife, Sarah (Gen 23). As he described himself to the people of the land He said, **I am a stranger & a sojourner among you** (Gen 23:4) & that's how he died. The same is true of Isaac. The same is true of Jacob. They died without having that land. Does this mean God failed in His promises? No. There are some things that God cannot do. God is infinite, unchangeable, & His power is unlimited. But there are some things God cannot do. God cannot do the irrational. He cannot make a rock too big for Him to lift. He doesn't deal with absurdities. & God cannot lie (Heb 6:18). When He makes promises to His people, He keeps them. But how can He keep the promise of land to a dead man? There's only one way He can do that & that's to raise

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<sup>8</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, vol. 2, p 110

him from the dead. The resurrection is the implication of the statement that God made to Moses. The promise of the covenant has not failed. All those promises that are made will be fulfilled. When Jesus quotes Ex 3:6 & adds He is **the God of the living**, He's saying that those men, though they've died & been dead for a long time, they still have a future. God will raise them from the dead & they'll receive the promises He made to them. He is a covenant-keeping God. He cannot lie. & His power is so great that it can overcome death itself & raise even the dust of the dead to a whole & glorious body. Had the Sadducees studied & believed the Bible, they wouldn't have had any problem with the resurrection.

Jesus concluded by restating His charge of vs 24, but even more emphatically, **You are mistaken** becomes **you are greatly mistaken**. Due to their ignorance of Scripture, the Sadducees had wandered from the truth into error.<sup>9</sup> That ended the discussion. Luke tells us that some of the scribes at this point said, **Teacher, You have spoken well** (Lk 20:39). I imagine they were amazed by the answer He gave because that question had stumped them in the past. Jesus figured it out & gave them the answer from a passage they knew but had never seen the resurrection in it before. They appreciated what He'd done silencing the Sadducees, & they said, **You have spoken well**. He'd solved the problem & left the Sadducees speechless. He'd demonstrated to them the resurrection from the nature of God, His power, & the promises of Scripture. But He wasn't finished. At the end of the week, He'd give the final proof of the resurrection with the resurrection of His own body from the dead. It's because of His resurrection that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, & all who've put their faith in Jesus will enjoy that resurrection. & that's our hope. It's grounded in Him, in the One who really lived, who really died, & who has really been raised from the dead. & that is a hope that will not disappoint.

Two theological themes deserve mention in this event: the authority & wisdom of Jesus & the hope of the resurrection. This passage carries forward the theme that's central in this series of controversies (11:27–12:40), which is the authority & wisdom of Jesus as Messiah. In fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah in Isaiah 11:2, Jesus is endowed with **the spirit of wisdom &**

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<sup>9</sup> John MacArthur, *Mark 9–16*, p 190



**understanding.** The challenge by the Sadducees fails because they don't understand the Scriptures or the power of God. While Jesus is referring here to Scripture's teaching about the resurrection (26–27) & the power of God to raise believers to a new kind of existence (25), in a larger sense these 2 proofs relate to His ministry as a whole; & they apply not only to the Sadducees' rejection of Him, but to the rejection by most of Israel's leaders. They've failed to comprehend that Scripture predicted both His coming & His death & resurrection (12:10). From the beginning of his gospel, Mark has placed Jesus' ministry under the promise of the end-time salvation promised by Isaiah & the prophets (1:1–3). If the Sadducees believed the prophets, they would believe in Jesus. To know the Scripture truly is to have hearts ready to receive God's kingdom & its King, Jesus the Messiah. The same wider application applies to Jesus' 2<sup>nd</sup> indictment, that they don't know the power of God. From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus had demonstrated the power & authority of the kingdom of God. His proclamation of the kingdom, His authoritative teaching & pronouncements about the law, His healings & exorcisms, His nature miracles, & most significantly for the present episode, His power to raise the dead (5:22–43; Jn 11) have all demonstrated the power of God at work in Him. The Sadducees, & others who've rejected Jesus, don't know the power of God because they don't know Jesus. The same is true today. The message of the gospel seems foolish to those who've never experienced its power to transform their lives. Skeptics say, *Show me a miracle & I'll believe.* But the greatest miracle of all is a transformed life. As Paul says in 1 Cor 1:18, **For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.** & then in Rom 1:16: **I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first & also to the Greek.** The message of the resurrection was foolishness to the Sadducees because they hadn't experienced the life-giving message of the kingdom of God & their Messiah, Jesus.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> major theme of this passage is the reality & nature of resurrection life. The Sadducees think they've caught Jesus in their trap because they view resurrection life as a continuation of earthly existence, which would play havoc with earthly institutions like marriage. Jesus responds that the resurrection is an entrance into a new & glorified existence that's far beyond anything we

can imagine. As Paul says, **things which eye has not seen & ear has not heard, & which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him** (1 Cor 2:9). The hope of the resurrection is our greatest hope, providing strength to face life's greatest challenges. Our resurrection hope provides strength to face any crisis, even death itself. Jesus' resurrection life means that **neither death, nor life ... nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Rom 8:38–39).

Let's quickly address the elephant in the room: This passage bothers some who fear their deep & meaningful relationship with their spouse won't continue into eternity. But this is to read too much into Jesus' words. Though there's no need for procreation in eternity & so no marriage in its present form, we can assume that all relationships in God's presence will be profoundly deeper than anything we experience in this life. In other words, our relationships with our spouses & families will no doubt be more intimate, not less, in eternity. Some people, influenced by popular culture, fear heaven will be endless boredom of floating on clouds & playing harps. Yet the Bible teaches that the infinitely creative God of the universe, who's given us a glimpse of His creative genius in this marvelously diverse world, is preparing something so much greater that our human mind can't even fathom it. That doesn't sound boring at all.<sup>10</sup> We can't understand the depth of joy & delight that God has prepared for His people in heaven. If you use your imagination & try to think of the greatest possible experience that you will have in heaven, then multiply the joy you will feel in that moment by a million times, you still won't have begun to appreciate what God is preparing for His people in heaven. Our existence there will be filled with joy far exceeding that which the marriage relationship provides now.<sup>11</sup>

The truth we must all face is that we're on a march, young & old alike, to the grave. & you know what? You're closer to that end right now than you were when we began this service. We're always getting closer. With each beat of our heart, we're closer to the end. & for many people, that's a discouraging thought. But it's not discouraging to those who've put their faith in Christ. We have

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<sup>10</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 537

<sup>11</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, p 313

nothing to fear from death because Jesus has overcome death. Through Him, we not only have overcome the grave, but what awaits us is the resurrection to glory. How glorious is it? Well, again, we don't have much on that but John gives us a hint. He writes, & this is only a teaser, **Beloved, now we are children of God, & it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is** (1 Jn 3:2). When He returns (& He will return) & we see Him, we will be changed into the glorious image of Son of God. John also says, **everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure** (1 Jn 3:3). The hope of the resurrection shouldn't just ease anxiety about death but should give perspective on the life that we're now living. It gave Abraham perspective. The author of Hebrews writes that **by faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign *land*, dwelling in tents with Isaac & Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect & builder is God** (Heb 11:9-10). He lived by faith. He didn't live for the present. He lived for the future. He wasn't a slave of a manmade system or the goals of the world. He dwelt in tents. He never built a city not even a house. The only things he built were altars & a tomb for his wife. His eyes weren't on this world. They were on the world to come. He was looking for the kingdom to come. Are you doing that? That's not to say that the present is unimportant. But our hope isn't in political solutions or economic prosperity. The best society we can build will someday collapse. They all have & they all will. If we amass a fortune, we'll one day have to part with it. We can't take it with us. So the question I ask you, the question I ask myself, the question we should all ask ourselves is, *What am I living for? How am I living? Am I living as an alien in a foreign land?* If you're a believer in Jesus, that's what you are. You're an alien here, but an alien only for a short time because the end will soon come. When it does & our Lord returns, we shall see Him & then be like Him. Are you looking forward to that? Do you know Him as your Savior? Have you believed in Him? Or are you a citizen of this world & tied to this earth? That's a discouraging thought, because if that's the case, then you're a citizen of the city of destruction. Flee that city & run to Jesus, who is the Savior from sin, the Savior from death, the resurrection & the life (Jn 11:25). Flee to Him. Believe in Him as Savior & Lord. For believers, the truth of the resurrection is a comforting

reality. The sorrow, suffering, & sin that marks this present life will end. We'll one day receive a glorified body, perfect in every way, when God transforms **the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of Jesus' glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself** (Phil 3:21). We will perfectly love God & each other & be able to worship God in holy perfection. We will have perfect knowledge: **Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known** (1 Cor 13:12). We will be perfectly motivated to perfect service & executing perfect obedience. We'll never be weary, tired, bored, discouraged, or disappointed but will experience eternally undiminished joy, unmarred by any sadness or sorrow, because God **will wipe away every tear from their eyes; & there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away** (Rev 21:4; cf Is 25:8).<sup>12</sup> Are you prepared for that day?

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<sup>12</sup> John MacArthur, *Mark 9–16*, p 193