

## “A God of the Living”



### *A God of the Living*

Text: Luke 20:27-38

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by Bass Mitchell

There is a story told about a mother and her young son. He was different from most boys his age; he had a terminal illness. All he could do now was sit and watch as other children went outside, laughed, ran, and played.

One day he and his mother were reading a story about Sir Lancelot and the Knights of the

Round Table. As they read the story, the subject of death came up. The little boy stopped his mother from reading by asking, "Mom, what's it like to die?"

How would you have answered that question?

Death touches all of us at some time, some way, and we find ourselves asking questions:

- *“What happens to people when they die?”*
- *“Is there really life after death?”*
- *“If so, what's it like?”*
- *“Will we know each other?”*
- *“What's it like to die?”*

Jesus is asked such a question in today's text from Luke. Let's see what it was and how he answered. Perhaps it will answer some of our questions.

The question comes from a group of Jewish leaders called the "Sadducees." They were opponents of Jesus. They had already made up their minds about this topic - there was no afterlife! And they constantly debated the Pharisees, another Jewish group, who did believe in an afterlife.

Why didn't the Sadducees believe in an afterlife?

Because they only accepted the first five books of the Bible-the Books of Moses-as scripture, and they saw no teachings there about any afterlife.

But what they did find was a law that said: If a man dies without a son, his brother is to marry his wife and have a son with her. This son will be considered the heir of the dead brother, thus assuring that the dead man's lineage and name would continue. If you want to read this law, see

Deuteronomy 25:5-10. It's an important law for understanding the Old Testament story of Ruth. Now the Sadducees said, "If there's life after death, why would God have given Moses such a law? It's not needed if a person lives on anyway. But, in fact, a person does not live on and that's the reason for this law. We live on through our children," they would say.

When the Sadducees debated the Pharisees about an after-life, they often used a question to try to show how absurd such a belief was. It's the same question they ask Jesus.

"Suppose," they said, "that a man dies without a son. His brother marries his wife, as the law requires, but he dies too. The next brother marries her but he dies, and the next and the next and the next and through seven brothers, and finally she dies too?" (I'm not surprised, are you?) "Whose wife will she be in the resurrection? To whom will she belong?"

You see, the Pharisees believed that the next life would be very much like this one except on a much higher, grander scale. They believed that persons would be married and that life would be such that a man's wife could give birth, especially to sons, everyday! Now isn't that your idea of paradise, ladies?

This question confused the Pharisees. They didn't have a good answer for it, for they believed you would stay married but just whose wife such a woman would be was difficult for them to answer. It stumped them.

Jesus took this question seriously. He answers by saying that such a question shows a great lack of understanding of the scriptures and resurrection. "In this life," he says, "persons marry and are given in marriage, but in the next life they neither marry nor are given in marriage. In fact, they cannot die for they will be like angels and they will be in the children of God."

Jesus is saying that we cannot compare this life to that one. There are no images adequate for it. It's like Paul says, "Eye hath not seen nor ear heard nor has it entered into the mind of man the things that God has prepared for them who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

God created marriage as a gift for this life because it is not good to be alone. It was given to give us intimacy, companionship. It's also given as a means to create new life, to have children and take care of them. All of this is needed in this life. But in the one to follow there is no need for this kind of relationship, for we will not be alone anymore. We will all have a profound sense of companionship with one another as God's own children. There will be no need for procreation, for having babies then, for no one will ever die there.

Jesus is saying that in the life to come, our relationships will far transcend even that of marriage, for we will have an intimacy, a closeness to God and one another for which there were no images to describe, no analogy we can find in this life to illustrate it.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He knows that more than anything the Sadducees admire Moses and his teachings. So, Jesus quotes Exodus 3:6 to them. "You are wrong," Jesus says, "in believing there are no teachings from Moses about the resurrection. Does not God say to Moses

at the burning bush, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but the living; for to him all of them are alive."

God did not say to Moses, in the past tense, "I WAS the God of Abraham, I WAS the God of Abraham, I WAS the God of Isaac, I WAS the God of Jacob." No! God said, in the present tense, "I AM the God of Abraham, I AM the God of Isaac, I AM the God of Jacob." God had entered into a covenant with these men long before Moses. That covenant, that special relationship with God was still valid, still alive for they were still alive. God was telling Moses, "I am the God of a LIVING Abraham, a LIVING Isaac, a LIVING Jacob."

Because God is God, a loving parent, nothing can take God's children away. When God enters into a relationship with us, nothing can end it - not even death. If God is God, how can God cease to be the God of those who have served and loved God and who have received God's blessings?

Isn't it interesting that God says, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob?" It is ABRAHAM who is alive with God; ISAAC and JACOB who live on in God's presence. Death did not take away their identity, their personhood, their individuality, their uniqueness, all that which made them what they were.

And, my friends, when God is our friend, death does not do that to us either. Resurrection in the Bible is the restoring to life of the whole self, of who we are. God gives new life to you, to me, as we are. Death does not end who we are.

A big part of what that means is that we retain our identity so that we do know one another.

Not too long ago, I had a funeral for a woman I don't think any of you knew. I will never forget something her husband said over and over again to me, "God will not let anything happen to her. God will not let anything happen to her."

He was uttering the faith that somehow his beloved wife, a woman he had made so many memories with, who was the light of his life, who had so much inner and outer beauty, that death could not just be the end of it all. Somehow, he did not know how, he knew God would take care of her, that God would not let anything happen to her.

Death does not end us. Neither does it, I believe, end the good work God seeks to do in and through us.

Perhaps you have heard about great poets, writers, and composers in the past who died without completing some work. There are even some titled as "The Unfinished Symphony," or the unfinished poem or story. Carot, the artist at age seventy-seven said, "If God lets me live another two years, I think I can paint something beautiful."

Isn't this true for all of us? We all will have unfinished business when death touches us on the shoulder.

We have not fully tapped all the potential God has put in us, the best is yet to fully come forth from us. We still have much growing and maturing to do. I cannot believe God will let us stay unfinished. I believe heaven will be that place where each of us can continue to grow,

- continually become all God has put it in us to be,
- continue to bring to completion the perfect image of God in us.

I'm going to be disappointed if heaven is just sitting around looking at pearly gates, walking streets of gold, and playing a harp. I hope, as a child of the resurrection, like all children, that we'll have the chance to keep growing, learning, and working...

I did not tell you about how that mother answered her son's question, "Mom, what's it like to die?"

Tears filled her eyes and she hurried to the kitchen, for she didn't want him to see her crying. She leaned against the cool door of the refrigerator and whispered a prayer, "Oh, please, Lord, help me."

She knew that the question was vital to her young son's faith, and it had to be answered truthfully and now. In an instant, she had her answer and went in and sat by her son. She said, "Remember how when you were younger, you would go outside and play all day with other children?"

"Yes," he said.



"And remember how when you came in, sometimes you would run to Mom and Dad's room, and there fall asleep on our bed, and in the morning you would wake up in your own room and you didn't know how you got there? Your dad with his big strong arms, after you had fallen asleep, would take you and put you in your room. Dying, sweetheart, is just like that. You fall asleep, and your heavenly Father, with his big strong arms, comes and takes you to your room in heaven he's made just for you."

"Whose wife is this woman? To whom does she belong?" the Sadducees asked.

"Why, she's God's" Jesus said. "She's a child of God with a room waiting for her in the Father's house."

So am I. And so are you.