

The Best Relationship Is Yet to Come

Luke 20:27-38 (NIV)

²⁷ Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. ²⁸ "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 raise up offspring for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. ³⁰ The second ³¹ and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. ³² Finally, the woman died too. ³³ Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?" ³⁴ Jesus replied, "The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. ³⁵ But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, ³⁶ and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection. ³⁷ But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' ³⁸ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."

What is this scenario that the Sadducees are pitching to Jesus? This concept of a brother marrying his widowed sister-in-law is just hard to swallow. Yet, the Sadducees take this right from God's Word, from the book of Deuteronomy that says, "If brothers are living together 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. 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." (Deuteronomy 25:5-6)

Maybe it makes it a little more palatable to our ears if you consider what else is said in that chapter in Deuteronomy about this brother-in-law law. It is prefaced that the brother is living with his married brother. In other words, this brother is not married. So, this law would not break up an already existing family. Really, the brother would do this to protect his brother's family line and protect his widowed sister-in-law's property and inheritance. Yet, the brother also had the right to refuse to marry his widowed sister-in-law. But to refuse to marry her would be considered a slap in the face, an insult to the family.

Although we may not marry recently widowed sister-in-laws, you probably know of families or you yourself have taken in a young widow and cared for her until her life stabilized. We have a different way of taking care of widows than the Israelites did, but both us and them and God want to make sure that these ladies were taken care of by their families.

This custom laid out in Deuteronomy chapter 25 was called a levirate marriage. Levirate law and levirate marriage was a law to help govern earthly life, to protect people on earth. But the Sadducees were not interested in the purpose of the levirate marriage. No, Luke shows the Sadducees' hand before they even flesh out their scenario. "Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question"...about the resurrection of the dead. (verse 27) The Sadducees were the second largest faction of Judaism behind the Pharisees. They were known for not believing in the resurrection of the dead, that there was no life after death, that a person's soul perished along with their bodies. You die, and you're done. They also held the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – in higher regard than the other books of the Bible, but they also did not accept the traditions of the teachers of the law, the Rabbis, or the Pharisees. They bring up this question to Jesus not in a serious conundrum that they wanted solved. No, they wanted Jesus to look dumb answering this question about a stupid theological point that makes no sense of whose wife will this woman be if she was lawfully and rightly married to seven different men.

You have probably heard questions asked about God with a similar attitude. The questions are not asked looking for an answer but rather to show how stupid the Bible is to them. Some philosophers have asked it this way: "If God is all good and yet there is suffering in the world, then can God actually be all powerful? If God is all powerful and there is still suffering in the world, then can God be all good?" They don't wait for you to answer because they already have the answer. Your concept of God is broken and ridiculous. They answer their own question saying, "If God were both all good and all powerful, he would take away all the suffering in the world." The fact that suffering exists is proof that the God of the Bible is stupid and made up.

These kind of pseudo questions are made with a preconceived belief that there is no way that someone can give a good answer, reasonable, rational explanation. No one can reconcile the concept of an all good and all powerful God with the fact that suffering exists in the world. These questions are asked not seeking to understand, but they are asked to prove what they have already decided is true.

How about you? Do you buy this? Does this kind of question keep you up at night? Is God's Word really that incompatible with the reality of life? Does the existence of suffering negate the concept of an all-loving, all-powerful God? If God was really all-loving and all-powerful, wouldn't he take this cancer away? If God was really all-loving and all-powerful, wouldn't he stop taking people away from me that I love, not let them live through years of pain leading up to their inevitable death? Answer that one, God!

Jesus redirects the Sadducees' thoughts in how he answers their question, and by doing so he gets to the heart of the matter with the Sadducees' beliefs. The underlying thought behind their question was that the resurrection of the dead is a false teaching, a ridiculous notion, and that they can prove this as fact by asking whose wife this widow will be in this silly resurrection of the dead. Because they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, what mattered most to the Sadducees were earthly relationships. And what earthly relationship is closer or more important to people than the relationship between a husband and a wife? If all we have is this life, then the ultimate relationship is the marriage relationship. This is the best possible relationship any one can ever hope to have, according to the Sadducees' belief system.

Is the marriage of a husband and a wife here on earth the best possible relationship we can ever hope to have? Jesus redirects them to what God says is the best relationship we can look forward to, and it isn't our earthly marriages. Jesus replied, "The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage." (verses 34-35)

To put it this way, your earthly marriage will have no bearing in the life to come or at the resurrection of the dead that will happen on Judgment Day. I know that whenever I say this to people, especially to young couples is premarital counseling, there's always this sad look. I don't blame you for that sad look. In fact, I say thanks be to God that you want so much to be married to this person for forever. That's a blessed marriage to think that you would never want to be apart from your spouse. And that only makes sense because God created marriage for you, with that in mind, to be together with your spouse. But God created marriage for this earthly life, not for the hereafter, not for the resurrection of the dead. God has in mind for you, for me, for everyone a better relationship than earthly marriage.

Earthly marriage, even the greatest ones, still have hard times, still have suffering. Earthly marriages have arguments, heartbreak, unfaithfulness, lying, financial struggles, temptations, abuse, insults, and the list goes on. Many make it through life still married in spite of these things. But at death that marriage bond is completely broken. That relationship has ended, but God has a relationship in mind for you and me that has none of these conflicts or disappointments or heartache. He has in mind for us a relationship that lasts forever, companionship that lasts forever, if we are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come.

How do I know if I am worthy to partake in the age to come, in the resurrection from the dead? God has made us worthy of such a relationship because he has suffered in our place, died, and come back to life. When the Father raised the Son from the dead that was him putting his stamp of approval on everything Christ had done for humanity. He had accomplished the making of a new relationship for us. He gifted us his worthiness, his perfection. He gave it to us in baptism. He gave it to us in the hearing of what he has done for us. Christ's tomb still stands empty. Because my Redeemer lives, I am worthy before God. He has made me worthy before him.

This is the new relationship God offers us because he has made us worthy: "[We] can no longer die; for [we] are like the angels. [We] are God's children, since [we] are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive." (verses 36-38) In the resurrection of the dead, in the life after this earthly life, God shows us that we are a part of his family, a family that never dies, a family with no fighting, no arguments, no disagreements, no bitterness, no struggles, no suffering. This family that God has adopted us into through baptism, through what he has suffered for us, is better than even the best marriage relationship on this earth. Marriage is not the end all and be all of relationships. No, being a part of God's living family is the best relationship any of us can ever have. That's what God has us look forward to in the resurrection of the dead.

Our eternal life and our bodily resurrection from the dead is not about our earthly marriage; it's about our eternal relationship with our God, that with him we will live forever because he is the God of the living. Because he himself bore our suffering, died, and rose from the dead, we know that there is a life to come where we will never experience any more suffering, no more arguments, no more temptations, no more hurt. He is our Father and we are his children, never to suffer again. This is the most important relationship we have, the best relationship that we can look forward to. God knows what the best relationship is for us. And so we place our hope in what he has said, that he has made me worthy of the resurrection by what he has done, what he has suffered for me. I live as a child of God with that hope, with that relationship, that best relationship, to look forward to. Amen.