

# The Answer is “Heaven”; is the Question “Marriage?”

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- Psalm 145:1-5,17-21
- Luke 20:27-40

The incident we heard in today’s reading from the gospel of Luke describes yet another attempt by the religious establishment to discredit Jesus. Earlier in this same chapter in Luke’s gospel, first Jesus was challenged to explain the source of his authority. Then they tried to trip him up with the question about whether it was appropriate for a religious person to pay taxes to a secular government. That’s when Jesus uttered the now well-known directive, *“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God”* (Lk. 20:25).

Today’s episode features another group within Judaism called the Sadducees — they were “temple insiders,” influential powerbrokers in that society. The Sadducees try to trap Jesus by asking him a convoluted, hypothetical question. The basis of the question was the practice called levirate marriage which said that if a husband died childless, his brother should marry the widow. The purpose was to provide a son who would carry on the name of the deceased. (Back then many people didn’t believe in life after death; instead, they believed that after one died, the way he “lived on” was through his children, and his children’s children, and so on.)

The irony of this episode is that the Sadducees would ask Jesus a question about marital status in heaven. You see, the Sadducees were one of the groups that didn’t believe in life after death. So it was obviously disingenuous for them to ask, “On the day when the dead rise to life whose wife will she be? Her first husband’s? Or his brother, or his next brother or the next one...?”

If you’ve ever watched a televised political debate, you know how a candidate tends to respond to a difficult question. Often the candidate will steer what they say to respond to a question that *they* want to answer. They’re asked a question about the deficit, say, and they’ll craft their response to steer away from the negative issue of a deficit to a positive issue like supporting America’s farmers.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a sermon originally preached November 11, 2007

Well, Jesus used a similar approach here. The Sadducees asked him a question that they didn't really believe in anyway. Jesus used the opportunity to describe a reality that the Sadducees didn't acknowledge – life that continues even after this life.

Their question expressed concern with how humans would relate to each other in a life after death: "Which husband will have claim to the wife?" Jesus responded by saying that human relationships are designed for the lives we live and know here, in this world. He said that our relationship with each other is not going to be the most important relationship we have after this life. It is our relationship with God that will be paramount.

Okay, that can be something of a "downer" to we who look at life from this side of heaven. We tend to focus on our own happiness, our dearest relationships here. We don't want to think about a new heaven where "relationships" will be a different thing. It's a hard concept to ponder.

We should expect, however, that resurrection life will be full of joys that we are not fully equipped to understand.... [except that we] should expect them to be far different and far more enjoyable than [the joys of this world]—more enjoyable than our [earthly] experience allows us to imagine.<sup>2</sup>

This is the challenge that Jesus addressed in this passage. He did not want to fall into the trap of becoming a domestic relations lawyer, trying to sort out marital and inheritance issues for eternity. Jesus seemed to say, "How this world will carry into the next world is not the issue."

The question Jesus answered was, "So what will heaven be like?" Notice that he took the pretext of the Sadducees and made it an article of faith: to the people who asked a cynical question about heaven Jesus responded that Yes, there *is* life after this life. Jesus said that our eternal lives will unfold in a world and in a manner that we who are on this side of heaven can barely begin to imagine or comprehend, much less describe.

The last book in the New Testament gives it a shot, though. The book is called The Revelation to John (it's sometimes erroneously called "Revelations"). The Revelation to John tries to describe the life to come. It was written by some early church figure who called himself John. John was exiled on the island of Patmos near Greece apparently because his preaching offended.

On a particular Sunday during his exile, this figure who called himself John had visions of the growing church and the promise of heaven. He wrote down his visions. They are wild stuff. We can't understand them. John used symbols and images that

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<sup>2</sup> Sermonwriter.com 11/11/07

made sense to the people of his day, but the meanings have long since been lost – we don't know what these symbols and images stood for.

The New Testament book called The Revelation to John has been a puzzle and problem ever since. The German reformer Martin Luther thought The Revelation to John didn't belong in the Bible. The sixteenth-century Swiss reformed theologian John Calvin wrote extensive studies or commentaries on *every* book of the New Testament... *except* for the book of The Revelation.

In the last two chapters of The Revelation, John tried to describe a vision God gave him of a heavenly kingdom:

John said that heaven is cube-shaped, fifteen hundred miles to a side, and fifteen hundred miles high. He talked about walls built of jasper – adorned with jewels. He talked about twelve great gates, each carved from a single pearl. He talked about streets paved with pure gold – transparent gold, clear as glass. He talked about the river of the water of life flowing through the city with trees of life lining the riverbanks (Revelation 21-22).

In one of my [seminary] Bible classes years ago, the professor talked about that passage. He told us not to take it too literally. He said that John was seeing a vision of something unlike anything that he had ever seen, and was trying to describe it using the best words that he had. He said, "Imagine trying to describe the color red to someone who has been blind from birth. Try as you might, you can't expect to communicate what the color red means to someone who has never seen color." He went on to say, "That's the kind of problem that John was faced with. He was trying to describe the indescribable. He had no choice but to use ordinary words to tell us about something that was anything but ordinary."

What John really accomplished was to help us understand that the heavenly kingdom is beautiful – beautiful beyond our ability to imagine. He succeeded in giving us a glimpse into a world that we are not yet prepared to see or understand.<sup>3</sup>

The limitations inherent in our humanness guarantee that we cannot know all that God has in store. We cannot know what heaven will be for us; we can only speculate, inspired by the hints we glean from Jesus. The late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin was the Roman Catholic Cardinal of the Archdiocese of Chicago back in the '80s and '90s. He was progressive decades before the current pope came to office. Cardinal Bernardin was a gentle giant in the effort of ecumenical relations – the desire to bring together people of different religions. When I was in seminary I had the chance to hear

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<sup>3</sup> SermonWriter.com 11/17/07

him preach from the pulpit of Chicago's historic Fourth Presbyterian Church on North Michigan Avenue.

On one occasion Cardinal Bernardin was asked to explain what heaven would be like. He responded by sharing a boyhood memory.

"The first time I traveled with my mother and sister to my parents' homeland of *Tonadico di Primiero* in Northern Italy, I felt as if I had been there before. After years of looking through my mother's photo albums, I knew the mountains, the land, the houses, the people. As soon as we entered the valley, I said, 'I know this place. I am home.' Somehow I think crossing from this life into life eternal will be similar. I will be home."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus talked about home, too. His answer to the Sadducees' question was "Heaven." Of course, their question seemed to be about marriage, but Jesus used their trap as an opportunity to encourage us to envision, and to dare to imagine for ourselves what awaits us beyond the limits of our touch and sight, to see heaven from the perspective of our imperfect world.

Maybe this image will be helpful. When Mary and I were married, my sister gifted us with a piece that she had cross-stitched and mounted on a frame. The front side of the cloth depicts words and figures through intricate, delicate stitches. But if you turn that frame over and look on the underside of the fabric, you what you see is not neat, orderly, simple or beautiful. Tufts of threads of uneven lengths, knots twisting this way and that.

Our lives on earth can be like the reverse side of the cross-stitch—we do what we must to accomplish what we can, but it's not always neat or easy. But the lives that await us in heaven are like the front side of the cross-stitch—presenting an image far more beautiful than could have been imagined if all you saw was the reverse side.

The Sadducees asked Jesus a contrived question that seemed to be about marriage. He gave them and us an inspiring and reassuring answer. Jesus said that awaiting us after this life we will have an eternal relationship with God—a new life in a new realm that will be more fulfilling, more satisfying, more beautiful and more eternal than our most inspired moments enable us ever to imagine.

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<sup>4</sup> Sermonwriter.com 11/11/07