

The Dead Are Raised

Luke 20:27-40

3/14/2021

The events in this passage take place on Tuesday of passion week. So Friday will be the crucifixion, and Sunday the resurrection.

Tuesday is a day of challenges and debate - people are challenging the knowledge of Jesus, the authority of Jesus, and the wisdom of Jesus. They are trying to trap Him in his words, to get Him to choose sides, they're trying to frame. People from across the political and religious spectrum are all coming to challenge Him.

They're not coming to learn, they're coming to harass and trap.

This Tuesday of holy week is an extremely busy day. We learn from Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels about all of the different challenges that came his way, and all he taught this day. By quick count he spoke on at least 10 different topics in this one day including marriage, the afterlife, taxes and politics, his authority, his identity as Messiah, coming judgment on Jerusalem, the end of the world, the greatest commandment, judgment on the Pharisees, and even on giving. So it was a full day of preaching to an antagonistic crowd.

He's being grilled and responding with perfect answers, and He's doing it in front of teams of brilliant lawyers who really want to nail Him. So this day has all the pressure of a doctoral dissertation, only if you don't do well, they execute you.

But again and again He displays His superior wisdom as his opponents keep dropping out and being confounded by His words and unable to succeed in their challenges.

It's exhausting to teach that much and to be grilled like that, and Jesus didn't have to answer to these people (He was their maker.) But like so many other things, he endured this for us.

And just from this one day, He left us with a body of teaching that has shaped Christian thought and shaped how humanity functions for generations.

And in today's passage, another group of people come up to Jesus to challenge His theology, a group called the Sadducees.

We don't know much about them, but we know they were a class of intellectual, priestly scholars. They only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament, the law of Moses. They had money and authority and really ran the temple until 70 AD when it got destroyed, and they were the rivals of the Pharisees, *usually*.

But Jesus made strange bed-fellows. Now, for the first time ever, the Pharisees and Sadducees agreed on something - they wanted to get rid of Jesus.

So they come to challenge him on his teaching about the afterlife. The Pharisees believed in an afterlife, the Sadducees did not. They all had their verses. But the Sadducees decide to challenge Jesus by asking how an afterlife could ever exist given some of the passages in the pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.

Luke 20:27 There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, 28 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.

So they bring up a practice that was described in Deuteronomy 25 called Levirate marriage. The deal was that if a married man died without having children, his widow was to marry his brother, and then the first son would be counted as the son of the man who had died.

It was a strange practice, but it was a social safety net. In their day, a woman was provided for by her husband, and in her old age, by her children if her husband had died. So a woman who lost her husband and had no children could be destitute and alone, and this practice allowed her to still have family and have a son that would take care of her. It allowed his family line to continue as well.

The law of Moses had prescribed that. And the Sadducees took this as evidence that this life is all we have because of the complications this practice could create in the afterlife:

29 Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. 30 And the second 31 and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. 32 Afterward the woman also died. 33 In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife."

So they say, There are seven brothers, each one marries a woman, and each one dies. So a man marries her, he dies, this woman moves on to the next, and he dies, then to the next, and he dies. Obviously not a true story because by brother number 4 those guys are running for the hills, or at least getting really good life insurance policies.

But the Sadducees use this scenario to try to prove there isn't an afterlife, because how could a situation like that ever be managed? "How could the afterlife work? If we all go to heaven and have this reunion, that would be an awkward, complicated family reunion, lots of drama, not exactly heaven. Whose wife would she be?"

34 And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, 35 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, 36 for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.

So Jesus replies to their challenge by saying marriage doesn't present any problem for the afterlife.

Because marriage is just for this life. One of the reasons marriage exists is to propagate humanity, and when there's a resurrection and a new humanity that can't die anymore (verse 36), you don't need marriage to propagate it.

So people will be resurrected, but their marriages will not. Which means, as we said last week, that marriage is not ultimate. It is a huge deal and a good gift from God, but a union for this life, not an eternal union. So don't live for that as ultimate. Don't expect marriage to be the ultimate love, the one truly satisfying relationship. Jesus is those things, and marriage is His good gift.

Now this might bring up some questions: I've lost my spouse, does this mean that we won't be married in heaven? Isn't a big hope that we have that we'll be reunited and see each other again? And don't we, at Christian funerals, say, "She's in heaven with Jesus, and reunited with her husband?"

Well certainly two Christians who die are reunited in heaven. And everything we know about the final state of things is that there are real human relationships, real friendship, real culture, real life in that place. But the marriage relationship will be no more.

But everything about the afterlife for Christians, which we'll spend the rest of today unpacking, is an enhancement. So the Christians who love Christian spouses are not reunited to them as spouses, but whatever that relationship becomes in the resurrection, it becomes something better than marriage and more than marriage, not less than marriage.

Our marriages end when this life does, but we don't, and our relationships don't. But they are all changed.

But this passage isn't mainly about marriage, it's mainly about the resurrection:

37 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. 38 Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him." 39 Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." 40 For they no longer dared to ask him any question.

So Jesus quotes from the part of the Bible the Sadducees believed in and says "even your section of the Bible says there's a resurrection."

When God introduces Himself to Moses, *your guy*, God said I am (present tense) the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God claims to be (presently) the God of people who had died. And how could He be their God if they were dead? Dead people who no longer exist don't have gods. They must live on.

And it's a simple argument, but they are satisfied with His answer.

Jesus, not afraid of taking a stand on doctrine, says, "The dead are raised."

And this is a doctrine that many of us are unfamiliar with, but one that gives so much hope if we believe it. And there are a ton of really important implications for the doctrine of the resurrection.

So what is this resurrection He's talking about?

The simple idea that many of us were taught as children is that when we die, we go to heaven or hell. Hell is the place of punishment, and heaven is a paradise existence where our souls go. The body dies, but the soul or the spirit lives forever in heaven or hell.

So the hope that we're presented is that our souls will be liberated from these bodies, finally free, and they will head off to the paradise they were made for.

You may have been told that we are just souls in earth suits. C.S. Lewis said "you don't have a soul, you are a soul, you have a body." And sometimes these ideas are coupled with the idea that the material world is bad. It hinders us from being what we could be. And one day, when we die, we will finally be liberated from the material creation.

And then we will go to heaven, where we spend eternity without bodies, as souls in a floaty place. We spend eternity without these annoying bodies and without the limits of material creation, in a state that could barely be described as human, we would be this totally other thing that exists as a spirit forever.

Now it's not that there's no truth in this. The Bible does teach that there's an intermediate state. There is a period of time between death and the return of Jesus where Christians exist as spirits in paradise with Jesus.

It is the teaching of scripture that spirits of the redeemed enter into a disembodied paradise existence where they await the resurrection in the presence of the Lord, and the lost enter a time of disembodied suffering in hell and await the final judgment and sentencing.

In Luke 23:43, Jesus promised the thief on the cross that he would be with the Lord in paradise "today." And when that thief died, his body went in the ground, but that day his spirit went to heaven. That very day.

In **2 Corinthians 5:8**, Paul writes, **"Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord."**

So to be away from the body is to be at home with Jesus.

In **Philippians 1:21-24** he says **"21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I**

cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

Paul calls his death a departure to be with the Lord.

When a Christian dies, their soul goes to heaven, right away. So the people in Christ that we have known and loved that have died are truly free from their pain and suffering, with the Lord, in paradise, they are in heaven, with a conscious existence where there is no sorrow, and that existence is so good that if we said they could come back here, they wouldn't. It's a serious upgrade being there.

But as you read through the New Testament, you see that the hope that Christians had for the future was not that they'd finally be freed from this old earth and these bodies and be the liberated spirits that they were meant to be. But their hope is a resurrection of the body.

They expected that this body will die and go into the ground, that our spirits or souls will go into the presence of the Lord, and then one day, at His return, just as Jesus rose from the grave in His body, we will rise from the grave, too in our bodies.

Jesus said this:

John 5:28-29 “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.

Paul wrote this:

Colossians 1:18 “8 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”

So Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. Which means there are more to be born from the dead - an only child isn't a firstborn. Jesus resurrected in his physical body, but He was the first of many.

He says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 15:

1 Corinthians 15:20-23 “20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”...

1 Corinthians 15:51-58 “**51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.**

God is going to do to his whole creation and to all christians what he did to Jesus on easter. There is coming a day of resurrection when our spirits will be reunited with our bodies, when all of creation is resurrected.

The future for redeemed humanity is not floating on the clouds, playing a spiritual harp, with spiritual wings and robes, it is a new earth, a new body, and none of it will be subject to corruption and entropy and death anymore, it will all live on.

Why does this matter? Why does it matter that this is where things are headed?

Is this just so we can “well, actually” our Christian friends when they talk about heaven? “Well, actually, heaven will be on earth” - 2 bible knowledge points for me.

This is actually hugely significant. I'll give you five reasons:

1. It is a unique feature of Christianity.

The idea of spirits escaping earth as final salvation was present in a whole lot of religions. Also, Plato taught that view of the afterlife, it was common. Aristotle taught that the soul can't survive without the body, so when we die its basically just lights out. But Christianity said “Plato is right that the soul lives forever, Aristotle is partially right that the separation of the soul and the body isn't a feasible arrangement.” The soul lives on, and one day the body will rise and soul and body will be ruined. This is a unique and distinctively Christian view of the future.

2. It is a promise that justice will come and things will be set right.

There are prayers throughout the Bible that God would set things right with the world. If God is just gonna wipe out the world and give us a spiritual existence, those prayers will never be answered.

If my wife says, “I noticed that the sink is leaking,” if my solution to that is to burn down the house, it's true, I've fixed the leak. But I haven't really fixed anything.

And through the ages Christians have been crying out for Jesus to come, for Jesus to fix what is broken in the world, to right the wrongs, to bring justice.

And the fact that creation will be resurrected means that God is not going to be giving up on creation, but setting it right.

And this doctrine has been a powerful weapon that Christians clung to in the face of unjust tyrants throughout history.

A brutal leader always has death as a threat - do what I say or I'll have you killed. And then he wins. So you lose the standoff if you get killed.

But the resurrection takes the sting out of death. So tyrants can't win, and they would lie awake at night wracking their brains as to what to do with these people that death doesn't work on.

In 1 Corinthians 15:54-55 again we see Paul taunting death: **"Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"**

It's like he walked out onto the field of battle and started taunting his enemy. Here's this massive enemy, that nobody has defeated before, the ultimate threat, the greatest fear. And Paul says "Jesus has conquered you - what do you got now?" He's taunting death, and mocking death. Is death all you got?

When a Christian was martyred in the first century, it would have looked like the tyrant had won. But not if that person is going to rise again. So this doctrine made a fearless people who could taunt death, who could spike the ball in the face of death, because even that enemy is defeated by Christ.

Even death doesn't mean we've lost.

God will set things right. Evil will not prevail. Even the powerful who can put people to death with the sword will not win in the end. Nobody gets away with things, justice is done, and God will do on earth as it is in heaven just like we've been praying for 2000 years.

So all hope is never lost, evil will fail and God will prevail, because there's a resurrection coming.

So the promised resurrection is a unique feature of Christianity, it's a promise that real justice will be done on earth. Also,

3. It affirms the goodness of creation

It's not uncommon, even for Christians in our day, to believe that the material world is bad. To believe that what is spiritual is more pure than matter. To think that the fact that something is created and other than God makes it evil.

To not be able to make sense of God making everything because our hope is to be in an existence without things, a spiritual existence.

And Christians can have a strange relationship with the material world, we don't know what to do with it. We can feel guilty about enjoying things or having things, there really isn't an earthly pleasure that doesn't have a Christian near it renouncing it.

Every year at Christmas there's a Christian guilt trip delivered for when we buy gifts for people we love. Christians are nearby calling it materialistic and wrong, because the holiday is about Jesus. As if going to the store and buying a gift for someone makes it not about Jesus. Jesus and things just can't go together, in their mind.

But Jesus came to redeem us, to save us, to allow us to be born again spiritually, and to redeem the material world. So the material world isn't bad.

And while anything can be misused and can become a God, God has made stuff and senses and pleasure as good things, and they will all be redeemed to have a place in the resurrection, and can have a place now.

1 Timothy 6:17-18 "As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share,"

We don't set our hopes on our things, we share our things generously, but we do that because those things are good and provided by God to be enjoyed.

Sin is not in the stuff. It's not in the materials.

So without guilt, we can enjoy a good meal with friends and order dessert.

We can enjoy the beauty in creation or in art, even art that isn't "Christian."

We can enjoy good music and a great movie.

We can make love to our spouses, play the sports, plant the gardens, take the nap, go for the car ride, enjoy the vacation at the beach, buy the house where you'll work for your family and neighborhood to thrive, take the promotion or the raise, get married, have kids, start the business. And not feel that we're doing something wrong or unspiritual.

God commands His people, on occasion, to fast. (There was one annual fast day in the Jewish calendar.) But there were lots of feast days. We need to stop thinking that holiness is only found in our gnostic, ascetic restrictions.

Holiness can be found in the feast too. "God gives us all good things to enjoy" which means that he wants us to enjoy them. Guilt is not in the stuff.

God is not a stingy withholding God who wants us gaunt and hungry and pleasureless. So we don't need to feel guilty about the right use and enjoyment of the creation. He didn't make the world so we could be tempted by it. He made it to be good.

Sometimes we like to invent guilt to attach it to things we don't need to be guilty about. And it can be a little bit of a smokescreen to keep us from dealing with our real guilt. So eating a brownie is a guilty pleasure, but our gossip habit is ignored.

So the resurrection is a unique doctrine of Christianity, it is a promise that justice will be done and things will be set right here, it affirms the goodness of creation.

Also it frees us - from pressure and from despair.

4. It Frees Us From Pressure and Despair

There are two twin mistakes we can make when it comes to what we do with the brokenness in this world.

One is we, as individuals and churches, can feel an enormous pressure to be responsible to fix everything. There's hardly a social evil that occurs that people don't cry out, "Why isn't the church fixing this?" And we can feel this pressure that we must fix everything that's wrong with the world. But the resurrection is the promise that Jesus will ultimately fix it.

But that doesn't mean that we then despair of even making efforts. We can experience so much futility in trying to do good that we just say, "It isn't worth trying at all."

But the resurrection means that our efforts at improving things matter.

Let me show you this in 1 Corinthians 15, this actually flows into the fifth point, that the doctrine of the resurrection

5. It Means Our Efforts are Not in Vain

In 1 Corinthians 15, a passage we read part of a few minutes ago, Paul teaches this doctrine of the resurrection and ends with a big "therefore" in 1 Corinthians 15:58:

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

So he says that believing in the resurrection should make us steadfast and steady, and cause us to do the work of the Lord, because it isn't useless.

This is huge because we think that efforts are worth it *if they pay off*.

If I tell somebody about Jesus and they come to believe, it was worth it. If they don't, the effort was wasted (we think).

If I help someone in need financially and they get back on their feet and don't need help anymore, it was worth it. But if they continue to struggle and continue to need, it was wasted.

If I start a church or a small group or a ministry and it grows and thrives it was worth it, but if it fizzles out and dies it was all a waste.

But Paul says, "Because of the resurrection, your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

So that means that, somehow, when creation is resurrected, our efforts somehow get resurrected too. I certainly don't know how this works, but the resurrection somehow means our labor is not in vain.

So this means that every labor in the Lord, everything done somehow for Jesus, will somehow be resurrected. Every moment of investing in your children, every song that you write and sing for Christ, every act of love, every bit of gratitude expressed, every effort to share the gospel, every act of integrity in the workplace, every gesture of care and concern, every prayer, every spirit-led teaching, will all find its way through the resurrecting power of God into the new creation.

We don't have to look at our good works as painting a painting that's going to be burned up someday anyways, but something that will be resurrected and part of that new world somehow.

One author wrote:

"What you do in the present - by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself - will last into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day we leave it behind altogether..." (Wright 193)

This means that the labor in the Lord that we do that doesn't seem to accomplish or change anything is worth it. So doing the mundane job that feels useless can be labor in the Lord. Caring day-in-day-out for a family member with alzheimers or a severely disabled child that maybe seems like it couldn't change anything, is not in vain and pays off in the resurrection. All that we do in faith, hope, and love, even if it doesn't produce anything, will be resurrected.

This also means that we are wrong to criticize the small efforts of others at doing good. We live in a Pharisaical, legalistic age where we love to throw flags and fault-find - why are you praying when there's so much work to do? Why are you helping with that when there's so much need over here? Your efforts are small, they are misplaced, they are failing.

But people who believe in the resurrection can't criticize seemingly dying efforts.

No labor in the Lord is in vain.

Jesus didn't criticize small and non-world-changing efforts.

Matthew 10 42 And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."

So if there's a reward for giving a cup of cold water from God, aren't we criticizing what God rewards when we criticize labors in the Lord that don't seem to bear fruit?

Let's not waste time bashing small efforts or even efforts that we think are misplaced. People have different passions and gifts and stories and different callings. Let's just be happy that all kinds of good is being done by all kinds of people in all kinds of places. And let's not give another minute to listening to the constant critics that will never be satisfied, who make a lifestyle of criticizing what Jesus will spend eternity rewarding.

And knowing that we are rewarded for those efforts somehow, that they all pay off in the resurrection, is what makes us steadfast. Just as death isn't the worst thing for a Christian, nor is the death or failure of our efforts.

So the doctrine of the resurrection is a unique feature of Christianity, it promises that justice will be done and things will be set right, it affirms the goodness of creation, it frees us from both pressure and despair, it means that none of our efforts are wasted.

The message we preach is that Jesus, the Son of God, took on human flesh, a real body.

And He went to the cross. And there he dealt with the real problem. The real problem was not things, it wasn't the creation, it was our sin. And he put our sin to death on that cross, defeated death which is sin's consequence, and rose again, not free from the material world, but in a real body. Promising that all of those who hope in Him and trust in Him and believe in Him for salvation will rise again like He did.

Sermon Discussion Guide

The Dead Are Raised - Luke 20:27-40

A. The Challenge of the Sadducees

What is the gist of the Sadducees' argument against an afterlife and resurrection?

What is Jesus's answer?

B. The Hope of the Resurrection

1. It is a unique feature to Christianity.

How is the doctrine of the resurrection different from the idea of "going to heaven?"

2. It is the promise that justice will come and things will be set right.

What does this point mean?

How does this affect our daily lives?

3. It affirms the goodness of creation.

How is it significant to us that the creation is good?

How do you suppose this doctrine could be misused?

4. It frees us from pressure and despair.

Discuss ways we live as if fixing the world depends on us. How does the doctrine of the resurrection help with this?

Discuss ways we live as if any effort at changing things is futile. How does the doctrine of the resurrection motivate us to do more?

5. It means our efforts are not wasted

How does the doctrine of the resurrection encourage us to do good deeds that might remain hidden from others?

How does this doctrine discourage us from criticizing the efforts of others to improve the world?