

A Marriage Made in Heaven

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 9, 2020.

The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.’ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.” But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching (Matthew 22:23–33).¹

The writer of Hebrews charges, “Let marriage be held in honor among all” (Heb. 13:4). Why? Because marriage is not merely a social construct but was established by God from creation: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). While fallen humanity seeks to distort it, even redefine it, marriage is according to God’s design. As Jesus explained, “from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ... What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mark 10:6, 9).

How do we know this to be true? The answer is as simple as the song we sang as children, “the Bible tells me so.” And because we understand marriage through what Scripture teaches, we should not be surprised to find a difference between what we believe about marriage and what secular society believes. While Christians should provide social commentary on the institution of marriage and advocate its benefits, fundamentally it is a matter of the recognition and authority of Scripture.

Which is why, we should be more concerned with how marriage is defined in the church. Who defines Christian marriage, culture or Christ? What dictates the bounds of Christian marriage, secularism or Scripture? Whether it be marriage or a myriad of other social issues, it would seem that we have ears to hear the sirens of society rather than the Word of God?

This is neither an American nor modern dilemma. There have always been those in the church who have at worst little and at best limited regard for God’s Word. Consider the Sadducees, the temple administrators and opposing party to the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin. They held that only the books of Moses, the first five books of our Old Testament canon, are authoritative. You can imagine this could lead to a distorted view of God’s special revelation. For example, they did not believe in the doctrine of the future resurrection of the dead, because it is not explicitly stated in

¹Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Genesis through Deuteronomy. According to Acts, the Sadducees also denied the existence of angels and the spirit realm.

I wonder, how could they profess to be God's people, serve and worship him in the temple, and yet deny the supernatural? What led to such a distorted view of spiritual things? In short, as Jesus bluntly tells them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." What the error of the Sadducees reveals is that what we believe about God's Word affects how we understand it and ultimately what we believe about God.

The Primacy of Scripture

Consider the Sadducees scenario and question: "Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her." The scenario appears to be intentionally absurd, likely to focus on what they perceive to be a theological dilemma regarding the resurrection.

The basis for their scenario is drawn from the fifth book of Moses, Deuteronomy, a law for Levirate marriage. It states, "If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go into her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel" (Deut. 25:5-6). In essence, it was a law preserving a family's name and inheritance, but the Sadducees have lifted it from its context to use it as an argument against the resurrection.

Let this serve as an initial caution to us in using God's Word. Scripture must first be understood in its original context before using it elsewhere. And, when using Scripture elsewhere we must always be faithful to the original context. It is not uncommon for Bible verses to be quoted and applied in error. This is often due to a zeal to support a predetermined argument, which is precisely what the Sadducees do.

Note that Matthew introduces the Sadducees as those "who say that there is no resurrection." Believing the resurrection to be an extra-biblical fabrication, they denied the prophetic books in which Isaiah declared, "Your dead will live; their bodies will rise...the earth will give birth to her dead" (Isa. 26:19). Or Daniel, who prophesied, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Deut. 12:2). They denied the wisdom books as well in which Job confesses, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another" (Job 19:25-27). Because they would not accept *all* of Scripture, they could not understand *all* that God reveals.

This too is a caution for us. It is not our prerogative to pick and choose what we believe to be Scripture. Your opinion is not the deciding factor on God's Word. We must accept the full canon

that God has given us, Genesis to Revelation, nothing more but nothing less. Let us remember, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). “All Scripture,” not just some of your choosing, “is breathed out by God.” It is the Word of God and given to perfect and equip you. Disregarding it will leave you uneducated, misguided, undisciplined, and disobedient, which sounds remarkably similarly to our biblically illiterate church of today.

Like many today, the Sadducees’ view of Scripture affected their understanding. Like deists, they viewed life absent of the supernatural and void of a future hope. It also impacted how they interpreted Scripture on practical matters, such as marriage.

The Purpose of Marriage

Consider again the Sadducees’ scenario and question: One woman was married seven times; all seven husbands died, as did she. Which will be her husband in heaven? Will she be one wife of seven husbands? No, Jesus corrects their faulty interpretation explaining, “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven.” This was news to the Sadducees; it may be news to you too. Let’s consider carefully what Jesus is teaching.

First, all who die in Christ are present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8) in heaven, awaiting the final redemption and their resurrected bodies. As used here, “resurrection” includes the entire state after death. Second, those who are married in this life will not be married and those who are single will not get married in heaven. Third, we will not *be* angels in heaven but will be *like* them in that we will not be married to one another.

Jesus’ words can be startling to some and discouraging to others. For those of us who have enjoyed a happy marriage, it seems unfathomable. But, if we step back from an emotional reaction to this and consider what God’s Word reveals in the purpose of marriage, it will help us better understand. In summary, God created marriage for partnership, pleasure, procreation, and profession.

First, God created marriage for partnership. This is evident from the opening pages of Scripture, when our Creator said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18). Even after the Fall, marriage continued as a blessing from God. Marriage is the most intimate relationship many of us will ever know. My wife is not only the church secretary (!) she is my best friend, and I thank God for the partnership we enjoy.

Second, God created marriage for pleasure. If you doubt this, try a literal reading of the Song of Solomon. Be prepared: It’s graphic! God intended the marriage of one man and one woman to be a beautiful union of monogamous pleasure. As the beloved’s bride sings, “My beloved is mine, and I am his...” (Song of Sol. 2:16).

Third, God created marriage for procreation. This is often downplayed today in our culture but not in Scripture. God commanded Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28).

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Likewise, following the flood, God commanded Noah and his children, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 9:1). Of all people, Christians should advocate and celebrate bearing or adopting and raising children. This is not to say that a marriage is any less of a marriage if a husband and wife cannot have children, but this is the exception and does not negate procreation in general as part of marriage’s purpose.

Fourth, God created marriage for profession. I like to say that the covenant of marriage preaches. Paul put it this way: “Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ... Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word...” (Eph. 5:22-26). Paul then explains that the “mystery” of marriage is profound in that it “refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). Christian marriage, though a covenant union between two sinners, testifies to Christ and his sacrificial love for his bride, the church.

So, God created marriage for partnership, pleasure, procreation, and profession. However, he did not create it permanent. Rightly, do we pronounce in our wedding vows, “till death do us part.” Death is the conclusion of the marriage covenant, but it is not the end of marriage.

We who are Christ’s bride await the final consummation of our union with Christ, a marriage made in heaven. In earthly marriage, we enjoy partnership. But in the new creation, we will enjoy eternal union with him. In earthly marriage, we enjoy pleasure. But in the new creation, freed from sin, we will enjoy God forever. Then we will truly understand what the psalmist means by “at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11).

Likewise, in earthly marriage we enjoy procreation. But in the new creation, the full count of God’s elect will be gathered, a family of God’s children in perfect, eternal harmony. In earthly marriage, the gospel is professed through the covenant union of one man and one woman before God, but in the new creation we will enjoy the final consummation of that profession. Yet, all of this is naught unless there is a resurrection, meaning the Sadducees had a distorted view of marriage because of their view of Scripture, ultimately blinding them to the power of God.

The Power of God

Quoting from the second book of Moses, Jesus asks, “And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? The verse from Exodus does not say that the Lord *was* the God of their fathers. The verb is in the present tense: “I am.” The implication is that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are very much alive. As Jesus concludes, “He is not God of the dead, but of the living.”

All who have gone before us, trusting in God’s promise of our Redeemer, are alive with our Lord in heaven. They, as do we, await a final resurrection to come. Upon Christ’s second coming, the dead in Christ will be raised, and God who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies through his Spirit (Rom. 8:11). By the power of God, in resurrected, glorified bodies, we will physically inhabit a new creation.

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We know this to be true, because God has revealed it in his Word. We know this to be true, because Scripture testifies that our Lord is risen from the dead, has ascended to heaven, and will return in glory. We know this to be true, because Scripture tells us that the married, divorced, widowed, single, all who are in Christ are the bride of Christ, a marriage made in heaven.