

The God of the Living

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[0 : 0 0] Never before have we had access to so much information.

And yet I don't think there's been a time in history where people were more hungry, more starved for truth. You know, never before have we had access to so much knowledge.

Have we had the ability to generate so much in the way of knowledge? And yet there are so many people who feel like they cannot know anything for certain.

Who remain perplexed about the deepest questions. What is life all about? Who are we? Why are we here? What is all this for? We have access to all of this information and knowledge.

It's all at our fingertips. It's a click away. And yet people are longing to know what is real. And I think this is in part what we see when we look at the Sadducees as they are described in Luke chapter 20.

[1 : 1 1] These were the intellectual elites of the day. They were incredibly knowledgeable. They were powerful. They were very well read. They were very well read. They were very well educated. They were extremely confident in their access to knowledge.

They ran the temple. They shaped public theology. They thought they knew God and how God worked. And yet as we're going to see, when they had the opportunity to stand face to face before the Son of God, they failed to recognize it.

So how could they know so much about God and yet not recognize God when they stood face to face? That's a question that we're going to explore this morning.

What we're going to see is that faith and belief are not just about having access to the right information. It's not just about having enough evidence.

It's not about being intellectually convinced. There are actually obstacles to faith that unless they are removed will prevent us from ever actually knowing and having a relationship with God, no matter how much information about God we might have.

[2 : 2 6] So this is what we're going to be looking at in more depth this morning as we look at Luke chapter 20. Let's pray and then we will open God's word together. Our Lord, Heavenly Father, thank you for this morning.

Thank you for this time. Thank you for your word. We now pray and ask that in your mercy, through your grace, and the power of your spirit, you would enable us not only to understand your word but to encounter you in your word.

Because you are the one we need to see, you're the one we need to hear. And it's in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, the living word, that we pray. Amen. So first of all, I want to look at these obstacles.

What are these obstacles to faith? Where do we see them in the text? This requires giving a little more background about the situation. As I said, the Sadducees were the religious elites of the day.

However, even though they were religious leaders, they weren't very religious. They were in some ways the equivalent of modern people in the way they thought about God and the supernatural.

[3 : 30] They believed in God, yes, but beyond their belief in God, they didn't really believe that there was much outside of what we can see and hear and touch.

In some ways they were more close to a kind of materialism, scientific or philosophical materialism, as we might call it today. They didn't really believe much in the supernatural.

They didn't believe in angels. They didn't believe in divine providence. And they very clearly, as the text says, didn't believe in a resurrection life that follows death. And we know from history that they would come up with these kind of absurd scenarios to illustrate the absurdity of the idea of the resurrection, which is what happens here in Luke chapter 20.

They're in a group of people. They're rivals. The Pharisees are present. And so the Pharisees did believe in the resurrection. And so the Sadducees see this as an opportunity to trap Jesus with one of these absurd scenarios.

And so they present a scenario that has to do with an ancient custom from ancient Israel called the Levirate marriage. And this is originally a custom that is then regulated in Deuteronomy 25 by Moses.

[4 : 48] And this is a practice that essentially says that if a man marries a woman and that man dies and they don't have any children, that it falls to the brother of that man to marry the widow.

And that sounds very odd by today's standards. But we need to understand that in this ancient world, this was really all about maintaining justice. It was designed to protect widows from poverty and isolation.

It was designed to keep the land and the inheritance in the family where it belonged. And so it was meant to be about justice and mercy.

The Sadducees, though, take this situation and they turn it into a kind of trap. So they say, well, Jesus, how about this scenario? What if you have seven brothers and the first gets married and then he dies and the second then does his duty and marries the wife and then he dies and they all get married to the same woman and die and nobody has any kids?

Later in the resurrection world, if they're all going to come back, what happens when that woman's walking along and she encounters all seven of these brothers alive and well? Whose wife is she going to be?

[5 : 58] And they're not really looking for an answer. They're trying to trap Jesus. Either he has to deny Moses and the practice of the levirate marriage or he has to deny the resurrection.

And ultimately, their goal is to mock the idea that anybody would believe in something like the resurrection, to just mock that as being absurd. And here is where we really begin to see the obstacles that prevent the Sadducees from truly knowing and understanding and having a relationship with the living God.

The first obstacle we see is the obstacle of arrogance. They're extremely arrogant. Mocking people who don't share your beliefs, mocking people who disagree with you is, among other things, a sign of arrogance.

We see that all over the place in our culture. We see it in religion, which is our focus this morning. You also see it a lot in politics. You know, not just I disagree with you, not just I see things differently or I support different policies, but a kind of mocking of people who don't agree with us on the big questions.

You see it in all kinds of places. Because when you mock somebody who disagrees with you, what you're really saying is, not only do I disagree with you and think your views are wrong, but I actually think that you're so wrong and so off base that you're not even worthy of basic dignity and respect, right?

[7 : 34] That's arrogant. But I would suggest that's not the only way arrogance shows up in our lives. Because any time human beings assume that if something falls outside our ability to understand it, it must therefore not be true, there's an inherent arrogance to that.

Because what we're really saying is that things that are real, we should be able to understand them and comprehend them. And if my mind can't understand and comprehend it, it can't possibly be real.

We're making ourselves into the kind of arbiters of what is not only true, but what is possible. That's a pretty grandiose view of yourself. So that's arrogant. Anytime we assume that our worldview is the only possible way to see things, that's arrogant.

So Charles Taylor, the philosopher, talks about the way we hold our beliefs, the difference between a spin and a take. And people who have a take on things understand that their view is legitimate, but it's not the only way to see things, and that there are other ways of seeing things.

That even if they're not true, they're valid. You understand how that person arrived at that set of conclusions. But a spin view, and ignore, he's really fond of odd labels that don't always make sense.

[9 : 07] But the spin way of holding your views is to hold your views in such a way where you say, this is the only legitimate way to see things, and anybody who disagrees is either crazy or an idiot.

Right? There's only one way this could possibly be made sense of. Right? And when you hold your views that way, there's an arrogance to that. Because you're essentially saying, I am, again, the only reasonable perception rests with me.

And we see this emerging in different contexts, in different ways, in different kinds of people. There are non-religious versions of this arrogance, and there are more religious versions of this.

It's arrogance. There's a certain kind of arrogance to committed atheism. So we're not just talking about agnostics or people not sure what they believe, but people who will go all the way as to say, I am fully convinced that there is no God, and I'm not open to the possibility of there being a God.

Or if you encounter non-religious people who would sort of mock and see religious people as being intellectually weak for believing in things that cannot be proven. Because ultimately, that's ignoring a very stubborn fact, and that is that atheism requires every bit as much faith as theism.

[10 : 29] You're committing yourself to believing something about the world and about the non-existence of God that can't ultimately be proven. So either way, you have a faith commitment that you're making.

But to hold that view and to say, I'm not even open to the possibility of there being a God, there's an arrogance to that. But I would also say that I think that there's an enormous amount of this kind of arrogance that is very prevalent among religious people.

You know, the fact is, we can have biblically sound doctrines, biblically sound beliefs. But the question is, how do we hold those beliefs? And how do we view people who hold to different beliefs?

You know, and I know this is true everywhere. Speaking for myself and the circles that I travel in, because I am a, generally speaking, theologically conservative Orthodox Christian, most of the circles I travel in, most of those people are theological conservatives.

And I can speak for my own tribe here and just admit that within that community, it's not uncommon to encounter a fair amount of smugness, a fair amount of contempt toward people who are viewed as being too progressive or people who hold to very different views or people who come out of different traditions or denominations.

[11 : 55] And if I'm really honest, you know, you see this popping up in the same church from time to time. You'll have people who, there's a kind of smugness or contempt toward people who you may disagree with even over secondary issues.

And it's very easy, and I've seen this in my own heart, it's very easy when you're looking at another denomination or another tradition. It's very easy for that smugness to start out as a kind of humor, but then it very quickly can kind of go off the rails and escalate into full-on contempt.

And by that, I mean just kind of devaluing people who come out of another faith tradition. So it's no longer about let's look at the Bible and figure out what is actually true and what we actually believe.

It's more of a kind of judgment or perception of the people who hold those views, right? A devaluing of them, right? And it's so easy for that to happen.

You see it all the time. That's arrogance. The point of that is that it's possible to have biblically sound doctrine, but at the same time, your heart is very far away from God.

[13 : 03] And this is something that if we're here and you're a Christian, we really should pay attention to this. You can have all the right doctrines. You can be able to point to all of the texts in the Scripture that justify everything you believe, and you can be on the money in your beliefs, and yet your heart can be very far from God because this kind of arrogance is like a wedge between us and the heart of God.

It's a wedge. So this is an issue that we see in the Sadducees. The second obstacle comes right along beside the first. So the first is arrogance.

The second is ignorance. And arrogance and ignorance, that is a deadly combination. Jesus' response to them is essentially this.

Even though you spent all your time studying Scripture, and by the way, they really only focused on the first five books of the Bible, Moses, they considered themselves to be experts in Moses, and they had a kind of wooden literalistic way of interpreting the books of Moses.

And so Jesus, it's no coincidence that Jesus brings up the example of Moses, right? Because what he's essentially saying is, you guys go around talking like you're experts in Moses, and that you know everything about Moses, and you've studied these books, and that's your whole deal.

[14 : 25] And yet, at the end of the day, you have no idea what this text actually means. You're missing what's right in front of your face. And he's exposing their ignorance.

And based on everything we know about the Sadducees, they didn't study Scripture in order to ultimately know and have a relationship and be close to God.

They studied Scripture because they wanted to be the smartest people in the room. Their mastery and expertise on these texts was one of the ways they maintained status and superiority in their culture.

And their focus was primarily around maintaining status and power. And maybe you've been in a church or a culture like this where your knowledge of the Bible is its own kind of status symbol.

Imagine that on steroids. So that's what it was like for the Sadducees. They were the experts. They were the final word on Moses. And they really did a lot. Pretty much anything and everything they did was connected to their desire for power, including the fact that, as you may know, Rome was the occupying force.

[15 : 34] Rome occupied Israel. They were the bad guys. Well, the Sadducees had sided with the Romans. So people hated them. That's why there's not monuments that celebrate the legacy of the Sadducees.

Nobody liked them. Because they did this naked power grab and sided with the occupying force. So their study of Scripture was about maintaining status.

And so the point is this. Just as it is possible to have biblically sound doctrine and yet have a heart that's far from God, so it is possible to spend all of your time studying the Scriptures and to be ignorant of their meaning at the same time.

You can be an expert in the Scripture, be able to quote it off the top of your head and to be fully ignorant of its meaning.

And a lot of that comes down to motive. Right? A lot of times in church you hear sermons and say, we should study Scripture more. Absolutely. But it's also important to ask, why?

[16 : 42] What is the point of studying Scripture? Because there are people who spend a lot of time studying Scripture, but for different reasons. Like there are some people like the Sadducees who study Scripture simply because they want to be the smartest people in the room.

You know, you're the person who, whenever there's a question in Sunday school, whenever there's a debate, right, when you're at your small group and somebody's trying to lead a Bible study, and you're the person who, you have to have all the answers.

And you're studying Scripture is kind of like, you know, loading up bullets so that you can be fully loaded, locked and loaded, ready to go, so that when that opportunity comes, bam, see, I'm the smartest person in the room.

Some people study Scripture purely out of a desire to accumulate knowledge. You see that a lot in academia. People have no relationship with the Lord at all, but they spend a lot of time studying Scripture because in the world of academia, in the world of scholarship, that could be a means of personal advancement.

You know, we used to call, we used to jokingly call seminary, cemetery because it's very easy when you're studying Bible and theology on an academic level, it's very easy for your faith to dry up because it starts to not be about having a relationship with the Lord.

[18 : 02] It starts to be about that paper that you have to write or that test that you have to take. Or you begin to go down these esoteric rabbit holes of people debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pen kind of issues, right?

So it can very quickly become a kind of cemetery experience if you're not careful and if you don't keep the focus in mind, what's it really about, having a relationship with the Lord? Some people study Scripture because they already have in mind the conclusions they want to draw.

And so the Bible is really just a means to justify that preconceived, predetermined end. One word for that is eisegesis.

You're reading your own ideas and preferences and agendas into the text. Right, so these are ways that we can spend a lot of time and energy studying the Bible and yet our hearts can be very far from God.

It's what's going on with the Sadducees. The central aim of Scripture, friends, is to bring us into relationship with the living God. That is why we have this gift of the Bible.

[19 : 07] And if we're not reading Scripture with a desire to know and be in relationship with God, if we're not sitting down and opening up this text and saying, God, I want to hear you through your word.

I want you to speak to me. Just as I might sit down with my wife and say, I want to know you better. I want to understand what makes you tick. I want to understand what's going on in your heart and what you love and what you care about.

Right, if that's not the way we approach the Scripture, then we're missing something very central to why God has entrusted them to us. Don't forget how Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness.

He quotes Scripture. Knew it by heart. These are the two obstacles preventing the Sadducees from knowing and having a relationship with God.

It's a deadly combination of arrogance and ignorance. And what you see again and again in the Scripture is that arrogance plus ignorance equals spiritual blindness.

[20 : 07] Arrogance plus ignorance equals spiritual blindness. You can have all the right doctrines. You can have the whole Bible memorized. And yet, if arrogance and ignorance are issues in your heart, you're not going to have any real relationship with the Lord.

So for all of us, as I said earlier, who are Christians, to the extent that either of these things is true of us, we need to be on guard. If we are inclined to hold our beliefs in ways that engender smugness toward people who disagree, or if our goal in studying the Bible is anything other than knowing and having a relationship with God, we need to be very careful with that.

Now, how does Jesus respond? Here's Jesus' response. You know, we don't see this in Luke's Gospel, but if you compare, the same story shows up in Matthew and Mark.

And in their versions of the story, Jesus responds to the Sadducees, and he says, you are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. He's diagnosing the problem.

He's saying, in other words, in order to remove these heart obstacles and have a relationship with God, you need two things. Number one, you need to be humbled by God's power. You need to be humbled by God's power.

[21 : 26] And number two, you need to rightly understand God's Word. Don't just know what it says, but understand what it really means, what it's really pointing to.

So I want to look at each of those in turn. First of all, you need to be humbled by God's power. In order to have a relationship with God, you have to be humbled.

In their arrogance, the Sadducees assumed that the resurrection life would be just like this life, right? Because they're imagining that reality has to conform to our expectations.

Otherwise, it can't be true. And so that's why they come up with this absurd scenario of all these resurrected husbands, brothers, kind of walking around trying to figure out who's married to whom. And Jesus essentially exposes how small-minded that is.

He's essentially saying, you vastly underestimate who God is. And you vastly and tragically underestimate how big this world is.

[22 : 29] And you vastly underestimate the life that is to come. It's a failure of imagination. In your arrogance, you don't realize how profoundly small-minded you actually are.

And he goes on to give us this glimpse of the fact that the resurrection life is going to be so much more than any human being can possibly fathom. He says there's no longer going to need to be marriage.

There's no longer going to be a need for childbearing because there's no longer going to be any death. And it's a way of saying that even the best relationships that we experience now in this life, the best friendship, the best marriage, right, the best family with the best kids, even that is just the tiniest glimmer of the life that will one day be and of that which will be true for all people.

Even the best marriage in this life pales in comparison to the average normal relationship that will exist between you and every other human being as well as with God which is profoundly comforting to those of us who aren't married or who find ourselves in hard, difficult marriages or who struggle with loneliness.

Jesus is saying the norm in the life to come, the norm will be so much greater that when we look back marriage will look like the tiniest little preview.

[24 : 00] It'll be just the tiniest glimmer of normative daily life for people in the age to come. And he says we need to be humbled by that reality.

It's beyond our ability to imagine. This reminds me of this wonderful parable from Henry Nowen. If you've ever read the book *Our Greatest Gift* and Henry Nowen he sort of imagines in this parable twins a brother and a sister who are in the womb.

So they're waiting to be born and they're talking to one another because there's no one else and they're having a debate about whether or not there is such a thing as life after birth.

So here's where it starts. The sister said to the brother I believe there is life after birth. Her brother protested vehemently. No, no this is all there is.

This is a dark and cozy place and we have nothing else to do but cling to the cord that feeds us. The little girl insisted there must be something more than this dark place.

[25 : 07] There must be something else a place with light where there's freedom to move. Still she could not convince her twin brother. After some silence the sister says hesitantly I have something else to say and I'm afraid you won't believe that either but I think there's a mother.

Her brother became furious. A mother? He shouted. What are you talking about? I've never seen a mother. You've never seen a mother.

Who put that idea into your head? As I told you this place is all we have why do you always want more? This is not such a bad place after all.

We have all we need so let's just be content. The sister was quite overwhelmed by her brother's response and for a while didn't dare say another word but she couldn't let go of her thoughts and since she had only her twin brother to speak to she finally said don't you feel these little squeezes?

every once in a while they're quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful? Yes he answered what's so special about that? Well the sister said I think those squeezes are there to get us ready for another place much more beautiful than this place where we'll see our mother face to face don't you think that's exciting?

[26 : 46] the brother didn't answer he was fed up with the foolish talk of his sister and felt that the best thing would be simply to ignore her and hope that she would leave him alone a child in a womb cannot possibly fathom cannot possibly imagine that there would be any such thing as life after birth a child in a womb cannot imagine what it would be like to run through a field cannot imagine what it would be like to dance under the stars a child in a womb cannot fathom what it would be like to taste chocolate or to see the Alps for the first time or to listen to a symphony or to swim in the ocean a child cannot fathom in the same way we cannot possibly fathom the resurrection life we simply know that it will be orders of magnitude greater than this life a child in the womb cannot fathom the concept of a mother right because their mother is all around them you might say in her they live and move and have their being cannot fathom what it would be like to meet that mother face to face and so it is friends with

God and the point is this the key to faith is having the humility to recognize that if we really and truly are dealing with the God of the universe if we're dealing with the God who created space and time if we're dealing with the author of existence itself there are going to be many mysteries that go way beyond our ability to comprehend and you say well does that mean that we can't be certain of anything we can't know anything absolutely not but here's the point faith is not about having 100% certainty on all of your beliefs it's not about having 100% certainty faith is a willingness to stake your life on what you believe being true it's not about having 100% certainty that it's true it's about a willingness to stake your life on it being true and that is a very different thing because you can do that while having doubts right you say where do you see that well look at the father whose son is demon possessed and he cries out to Jesus and he says I believe help my unbelief he's filled with doubt no certainty there but based on everything he knows he's willing to throw himself at the feet of

Jesus right the point is this it's not the quantity of our faith that saves us it's the object of our faith and a willingness even filled with doubt to throw yourself at the feet of Jesus is all it requires and I think sometimes this desire for 100% certainty is really a desire to not have to rely on faith to not have to throw ourselves at the feet of someone greater than ourselves it's a desire for control to manage rather than to surrender so we need to be humbled by the power of God and the second thing we see here in Jesus response is that we need to rightly understand God's word even though the Sadducees claim to be experts on Moses Jesus says you have no idea what you're talking about it's right in front of your face I'm right in front of your face and you're missing it you know when Moses encounters God in the burning bush

God refers to himself by saying I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob he doesn't say I was their God when they were alive they worshipped!

I am their God in other words they're here with me right now worshipping and praising and celebrating I continue to be their God because they continue and the Sadducees were ignorant of the fact that the death is for eternity from the very beginning and that death is an aberration from that norm death is not a part of the plan for all time it's a symptom of a world broken by human sin and rebellion and of course the Sadducees completely missed the fact that God's plan is ultimately to overcome death once and for all as the prophet Isaiah writes in chapter 25 God will swallow death forever and as the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces and of course this is ultimately all pointing to and will ultimately be found in Jesus

[32 : 05] Christ himself in the chapters that follow Luke chapter 20 Jesus is going to be arrested he's going to be mocked he's going to be tortured he's going to be executed and it seems as though death had the final say the final word until some of Jesus his disciples some women go to the tomb and the unthinkable has happened the tomb is open and it's empty and Jesus is nowhere to be found and they realize that all of this unfolding story of scripture was ultimately meant to culminate here in the truth that we proclaim every Easter that Christ is risen!

disciples encounter him a little bit later in Luke's gospel on the road to Emmaus and he sits with them and he opens the scriptures and he shows do you want to know how to understand scripture and to know what it actually means well the key is this it was always and forever about me every page every sentence every word from Genesis to Revelation is ultimately about and pointing to and will always about me that's the puzzle piece in the middle that makes the whole thing fit together so in order to rightly understand God's word that's the key we have to understand it was always about Jesus all along and then we realize that the promise for us is that one day just as Jesus rose from death God will raise us up and then he will renew and restore this world that the resurrection is just the beginning but simply knowing this is not enough as

Jesus says in verse 35 only those who are considered worthy will take part in the age to come but this is the good news of the gospel the good news of the gospel is he does not say only those who prove themselves worthy he says only those who are considered worthy those who are counted worthy by God and that's where the gospel begins to emerge as our greatest hope that the way to be found worthy comes not by proving our worth to God but actually by confessing our unworthiness to God and then crying out for the mercy that God offers through Jesus Christ to make us worthy right to cleanse us and restore us to what we were created to be which of course happens through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the promise of the gospel is that for all people who come to

Jesus in faith and repentance they will be saved and we will dwell forever together in eternity because our God is not the God of the dead he is the God of the

let's pray Our Father we thank you that you're the God of the living and that you desire to make us alive spiritually alive and that's what we're here for we're here for life we're here to taste the life that you offer to receive it and be nourished by it and even now as we pray these words we ask that you would be preparing our hearts to come and receive that life through the table Lord that as we receive you we would receive that life Lord that you would make us continue to make us more fully alive more fully human in anticipation of the age to come we pray this in Jesus's name Amen