

God of the Living

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[0 : 0 0] Many years ago when my children were small, they used to watch a program called The Fimbles. One of the wonderful things about having small children is being able to watch their television programs. It's a great release from the stress of modern living. Anyway, one of the characters from The Fimbles was an octopus-like many-legged creature called the Snaggle-Taggle. Now the Snaggle-Taggle would wrap its arms and its legs around an unsuspecting victim and tickle them senseless. That was the Snaggle-Taggle. And of all the creatures on The Fimbles, the Snaggle-Taggle was without a doubt my favorite, as my children well know and have experienced many times. It's that trapping, it's that tickling, it's a great example of rough play. In Matthew 22, in this series of four controversies between Christ and the religious leaders of Israel, there's a Snaggle-Taggle. They're coming to Christ trying to trap him with the question of taxation in verses 15 through 22, resurrection in verses 23 through 33, law in verses 34 through 40, and identity in verses 41 through 46. They're wrapping him around with difficult questions and controversies.

They're trying to tickle him into making a mistake. But little do they realize it's not they who are wrapping him up, but he is trapping them. With such powerful wisdom and love, Jesus turns the tables upon them and he wraps them up with questions they don't want to answer because it would involve them admitting they were wrong. And that Jesus is the Christ who has been sent by God to be the king of his people. In the late 1950s, an agnostic American journalist called Frank Morrison decided that he wanted to discredit the resurrection accounts and trap Christianity. He was intent on doing the same thing these religious leaders were doing to Jesus here in Matthew 22. Fortunately for Morrison, the same Jesus who turned the tables on the religious leaders here turned the tables on him also. Having investigated all the evidence for the resurrection, Frank Morrison changed his mind. He was compelled by the evidence to admit that Jesus really did rise from the dead on the third day. He became a Christian and proceeded to write a book on his findings called *Who Moved the Stone*, which I know many of us here have read. It's a very dangerous thing to try and pull a snaggle-taggle on God, to trap him and tickle him with questions that you don't think he can answer.

At least, at least you might be proved wrong. At most, you might end up not wrapping him around with half-truths. He'll wrap you around with his love.

Now, the Sadducees, of whom we read in verse 23, were a very significant group of religious leaders in the Israel of Jesus' day. They were often drawn from the upper classes of society and were very pro-Roman. Heavily influenced by Greek culture and philosophy, they were socialites, they were celebrities, they were the A-listers of Israel. Many of them were very wealthy. In fact, they were almost the diametric opposite from the sect of the Pharisees, who by and large were men of the people and fiercely nationalistic. The Sadducees, as we learn in verse 23, did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. And their justification for this was that it was not clearly taught in the Jewish Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers.

[4 : 1 9] The Sadducee Bible only had these five books, not any of the others in the Old Testament. And because they maintained that the doctrine of the final resurrection of the dead was not taught in the first five books of the Bible, they did not believe it. I guess you might say, as opposed to the Pharisees who were the religious legalists of the day, the Sadducees were the religious liberals of the day. Both legalist and liberal are outraged by Jesus' teaching, because actually, as we'll discover, legalism and liberalism are essentially the same thing in their attitude to the grace of the kingdom of God.

So really, it's not surprising that having repulsed the attack of the Pharisees in verses 15 through 22 on the question of taxation, and therefore their nationalism, Jesus now faces an attack from the

Sadducees on the question of resurrection. In their minds, they're going to succeed where the Pharisees failed, because they're smarter than the Pharisees. They're going to trap Jesus in a snaggle-taggle, and tickle him until he squeals, I submit. And so they spin him a story, and ask him a question, which on the surface of things seems to be about marriage, but is really about resurrection.

That doctrine, which because they could not find it clearly taught in the first five books of the Bible, they reject it. They begin with what they know about their Bibles, and they relate to him the quote from Deuteronomy 25 verse 5. Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry his widow and raise up offspring for him. That's in the Bible. To them, this is a clear command, given that it comes from their Bible. They tell him a story. They don't present this as hypothetical. They present this as if it really happened. It's the story of seven husbands and one wife. The brothers marrying her in obedience to the command of Moses in Deuteronomy 25.

One brother dies, and the next marries her, and so on, and so on, until they're all dead, and then she's dead also. And then in verse 28 comes the question, in the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven since all of them were married to her?

Now, Jesus has never been interested in fiction, always in fact, and he sees right through their question, straight into their hearts. The problem doesn't concern marriage relationships in the kingdom of heaven, but the question of resurrection. As we saw last week, remember, Jesus perceives the real reasons behind a person's rejection of him, not the reasons they'll tell you, but the real reason.

[7:18] Before we move on to Jesus' answer, I want to deal with something Jesus says here at which many people struggle, namely the words, at the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage, they will be like the angels in heaven. Does this mean that the committed relationships married couples have here will mean nothing in the kingdom of heaven? I can understand how many would struggle with this teaching, given that by the very nature of our marriage relationships, we love each other, and we want to be with each other, always. But I don't think Jesus is saying what we think he is here, that somehow in the kingdom of heaven we won't love our marriage partners any less than we love them here. We need to bear in mind the context of the question the Sadducees are asking him, namely, the reason why successive brothers married this woman. They married her, in verse 25, in order to produce children, to maintain the family name. But in heaven there will be no need for offspring, because there will be no death. Seems to me that Jesus is speaking less of what we understand by love and marriage relationships, as much as he's speaking about what we understand by procreation and childbearing. Just as the angels in heaven seem to produce no offspring because they don't die, so there will be no need for us in the resurrection to produce offspring either. Besides which, as someone with whom I spoke about this text last night reminded me, that the glorious vision of the exalted Jesus

Christ will completely fill our minds there. But let's not worry about this text too much. An elder in the far north was once asked the question, do you think we'll recognize each other when we get to heaven? To which he sagely replied, do you really think we'll be any more stupid in heaven than we are on earth? Of course we will know each other, and of course we shall love our wives.

That's not what Jesus is talking about. He's talking about the resurrection. And rather than allow himself be caught in the Sadducee's snaggle-taggle, he's going to catch them in one of his own. From the Jewish Torah itself, he's going to show them how wrong they are, and he's going to challenge them as to where they stand before God. And so, once again I say, on whatever issue, it is a really dangerous thing to try and place God on a snaggle-taggle, to tickle him with questions you think he can't answer.

At the very least, you might be proved wrong. At the very most, you might end up not wrapping him up with half-truths, but him wrapping you up with love. Jesus' response begins in verse 29, you are in error, you have been deceived, he's dead straight with them. You're wrong, you're wrong. It's not you've got an alternate view and that's valid, but you are wrong. I wonder whether he's saying that to anyone here today. Whether in your hearts you've been raising obstacles against him, only to hear his voice saying, no, no, no, no, you've been deceived, you're wrong, you're in error.

[10:57] Jesus then proceeds to give them four reasons why they are wrong concerning the issue of resurrection. Your grip is too weak. Your God is too small. Your gaze is too short. Your grace is too legalistic.

And I'll go through each one of these briefly. Your grip is too weak, he says. Jesus begins his devastating critique of the Sadducees by saying to them, you do not know the scriptures. And then later he says to them, have you not read, verse 31, what God said to you?

These men were experts. They prided themselves on their knowledge of the Torah. But for as much as they thought they knew, they had not discernment to know what the first five books of the Bible were really all about. They may have been experts in the laws laid down in Exodus, but they were strangers to the God whose laws these were. They knew the first commandment by heart.

You shall have no other gods before me. But they were strangers to what came before, the gracious prologue to the law. I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. They had always put law before grace. Their vision of God was driven by the wrong interpretation of scripture, by their failure to understand the totality of his self-revelation as the God of unfailing love and righteousness. You've heard the old American Indian proverb, never criticize a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.

[12:37] The older I get, the more I realize that it's really unwise to judge someone's motives until you understand that person completely. In an even greater sense, we have to be uber careful not to criticize God until we have understood the totality of who he has revealed himself to be in his word. We think we understand one thing about him and then we proceed to criticize him for that which we have failed to understand about him.

All the time we're passing judgment on him, we need to hear the words of Jesus in our minds. You do not know the scriptures. Have you not read what God said to you? I'm constantly amazed by ways in which people throw up apparent contradictions in scripture as objections to their belief in God. They pick one part in isolation and they fail to square it with the rest of scripture. The classic one, of course, is that of the evangelical atheists as they contrast the God of the Old Testament as the God of wrath and the God of the New Testament as the God of love. They haven't happened upon a contradiction and it's shaken their faith.

Rather, they are looking for excuses to discount the existence of the goodness of God so they can remain unaccountable for their character, their behavior, and their actions. As Jesus goes on, if the Sadducees really knew the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, half as well as they thought they did, they would have seen and understood the doctrine of resurrection. It's like Jesus says to them, your grip of scripture is too weak.

Frank Morrison thought he could discredit the resurrection once and for all, but then as he read through the gospel scripture and put it to the test, he realized he'd been wrong all along.

Before we dare pass judgment on God, let us walk a mile in his moccasins. Let's make sure that we know what we're talking about, that we really do know the scriptures. The irony, of course, is that if the Sadducees who were trying to trip Jesus up here knew their scriptures in any depth at all, they would have realized who it was standing before them. Jesus, not just a man, but the greater than Moses, the Christ of God. And rather than tickling him, that I worshiped him. And furthermore, when Jesus rose from the dead just a few days after this conversation, they would have believed. Your grip is too weak. Your God is too small, secondly. Your God is too small. In that first complaint against him, Jesus says, you are in error because you neither know the scriptures nor the power of God. Nor the power of God. It is to say, at the least, damning of the

[15:39] Sadducees, that they, the religious leaders of Israel, do not know the power of God they are proclaiming. One of the reasons they discounted the resurrection is because they could not logically figured out how God could raise the dead to new life. And that, of course, is the problem, is it not?

But because their finite minds could not work out how it could be done, they concluded that it could not be done. Their heads are hammers, and to a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And if it isn't a nail, they're going to treat it like a nail anyway. How can God do such a thing as resurrection? There are, after all, no accounts of the resurrection in the Torah, even though there are in other parts of Scripture. But who are these Sadducees to limit the power of the God who has the power of life and death? Can the God who, in the very beginning in Genesis 1, create the world out of nothing, can this God not also bring together all the particles which constituted our bodies after we die and raise us to new life? Yes, but of course he can. The God of the Sadducees is no God at all, and certainly not the God of the Bible. Our God is way too powerful for that.

That's the problem, is it not? Listen carefully to this. That's the problem, is it not? We limit God to merely what we think he cannot do, because our minds aren't big enough to accept what he can do.

Let me say that again. We limit God to merely what we think he cannot do, because our minds aren't big enough to accept what he can do. The Sadducees limited the power of God to do what for us is unthinkable, raise the dead. One of the most popular TV shows out there right now is Meet the Ancestors, where scientists will reconstruct the face of a person who has been dead for a thousand years just by using computer graphics on a screen taken from that person's skull. The face these scientists have reconstructed. That's amazing. The face of that person. But God can bring that person who's been dead for a thousand years back to life, because his power has no limits. I wonder sometimes the extent to which the God against whom so many in our society argue, the God whom they insist does not exist, is a straw man. He's not the real God. He's a God of their imagination. They limit God to merely what they think he cannot do, because their minds aren't big enough to accept what he can do.

The God against whom they're beating their fists is too small. These Sadducees are trying to tickle Jesus into a trap. Little do they realize that in a few days' time, in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, God will have demonstrated a greater power than our little minds can ever conceive.

[19 : 09] Third, your gaze is too short. Your gaze is too short. As I said earlier, the Sadducees were in general composed of upper-class Judeans.

Their lives were fairly easy compared to the rest of the population. Concentrated merely in the capital city of Jerusalem, they lived in large houses and they were weighted on, handed in foot by slaves and servants. They were highly respected. They wielded great power and influence, especially with powerful men like Herod and the Roman proconsuls. We all know the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

In all likelihood, the rich man in that story was a Sadducee. Someone who had all the good things in this life compared to Lazarus, for whom life had been a struggle.

And the Sadducees come to Jesus with this story. They don't present it as fictional, but as fact. There's the tragedy of seven brothers and their death. And they're trying to use that story to disprove the resurrection.

But consider Jesus' response in verse 30. At the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. We've dealt with what Jesus said in the second half of this verse in the introduction.

[20 : 28] But what I want to consider here is what Jesus says in the first part of the verse. At the resurrection, in the resurrection, for Jesus, the resurrection was no nice idea, fantasy, or even a doctrine per se.

It was a fact of life just as surely as a man's birth and death. For Jesus, the resurrection was certain to happen, no doubt whatsoever.

There will be a day when, according to the scriptures and the power of God, the dead shall be raised to new life. This is not a fiction. This is not a legend or a myth.

It is a fact. One of the reasons the Sadducees couldn't accept it is because they were living their best lives now. Life can't get better than living in a big house, being well-respected in society, having servants waiting upon you, hand and foot.

What is there to look forward to in the resurrection if you've got everything you want in life now? The gaze of the Sadducees went no further than this life because for them this life was a ball.

[21 : 39] The thought of resurrection and subsequent judgment was abhorrent to them because they didn't want to be accountable for the lifestyles they lived here and now. They wanted to enjoy life. Their slogan was, YOLO, you only live once.

Jesus does not play games with them. You're wrong, he says. And in the day of resurrection, you'll discover how wrong you are. Your gaze is too short in that you think this life is all there is.

And because of that, you want to live it up now rather than prepare for the life of the resurrection and the kingdom of heaven. Does this sound familiar?

By and large, I wonder whether this is one of the problems we face today as the Christian church. Speaking prophetically into a society which does not believe in a future judgment or resurrection. Furthermore, I wonder whether this is a problem for us as Christians in the West, in the Christian church because so many of us are having our best lives now.

[22 : 50] We forget how much greater and glorious the life to come shall be. And that in order to pursue greatness in the kingdom of heaven, we must hold light to the things of this world.

Remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount? Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, Mr. Sadducee, where moth and rust destroy, where thieves break in and steal.

But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, Lazarus, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Your gaze is too short. And then lastly, your grace is too legalistic. Your grace is too legalistic. I want to draw us back to the fundamental truth of this passage.

Namely, the way in which Jesus uses the scriptures of the Torah, the only Bible the Sadducees will accept, to prove that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

[23 : 59] And Jesus quotes Exodus 3, verse 6. As God says to Moses on top of Mount Sinai, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

The commitment of God to, and his love for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, did not end when they died in this life. It goes on.

He continues to love them. He continues to be committed to them, because even though they are dead to this world, they are alive in his world.

We might not see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob now. Their bodies are nothing but dust in the Palestinian sand. But they are alive before God. In fact, they are more alive now than they have ever been, because they are in the immediate presence of God himself.

The problem with the Sadducees is not just that their understanding of the power of God is deficient, but their comprehension of the love of God in the covenant of grace is nonexistent.

[25 : 10] The fact is, not even physical death shall stop the overflow of the grace of God toward us in Christ Jesus. His love for us and his grace toward us overwhelm the cords of death and the terrifying prospect of our own mortality.

I hope we understand this. Because even though I'm not taking as long over it as I should, it's what I want to leave with you. To use the language of Paul, I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor demons, nor the present, nor the future, nor any powers, nor depths, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord, not death.

And it's all of grace. Our forgiveness and resurrection. It's all because the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. Death will never stand in the way of God's love for us or his overflowing grace toward us.

Rather, we shall inherit on the day of resurrection the fullness of that which Christ has done for us on the cross and in his own resurrection. The Sadducee thought they could catch Christ in a snaggle-taggle to trap him and tickle him into making a mistake.

How arrogant and foolish all the time Jesus is trapping them. Your grip is too weak. Your God is too small. Your gaze is too short.

[26 : 45] Your grace is too legalistic. You know, the saddest thing of all is that as we go on in the New Testament, you can prove this in your own time, whereas we discover that a great many of the Pharisees became followers of Jesus after his resurrection, we don't read of even one Sadducee who became a Christian.

Not one. They could not rise to the challenge of humbling themselves before Jesus and admitting they had been wrong.

But for us, the application is somewhat different. Since Jesus has risen from the dead, we too shall rise. We shall all stand before God. And what shall we say when he holds us accountable for all that we have thought and done and said?

Surely we shall point to Jesus, the very Jesus who spoke these words, seated in glory at God's right hand and say, I'm guilty as charged, but Jesus died and rose for me.

Surely we're going to stop playing snaggle-taggle with God. Surely today we're going to take him seriously and believe in him. Let us pray.

[28 : 10] Lord, we thank you for this passage of Scripture. And we thank you that we have a glorious future. A future that is not contained within the cynicism of this world, not within the skepticism of our own doubt, but within the world of opportunity that Christ presents us with here.

We shall be like the angels in heaven whose very existence is directed entirely toward your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.