

...As For the Dead...

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[0 : 00] It would be great if you opened the Bible to the passage that was just read, Mark chapter 12, verses 18 to 27 on page 848.

For those who do, there's chocolate fish. Yesterday in the newspaper, I received this, came to our house.

Homes and living Vancouver. And I read it with great fascination. And it was very interesting reading this, thinking about the resurrection.

A number of the ads. And I want you to notice the language of advertising in these advertisements for places. Here is a place in Vancouver. It's a number of suites.

And it is luxury living at its best. At its best. And all of you who don't live there are not living at your best.

[1 : 03] On the next page is another suite, a group of suites. And the heading is Vancouver's Best. And they've crossed out Vancouver and put worlds above it.

So those who live there know that everybody else in the world is living in an inferior fashion. And then the third, you turn the page and this is somewhere in the islands.

A long way away, I believe. And the heading is this opportunity won't last. Only the views last forever. And if anyone wants to come and get this, I'm just going to put it here for after the service. Mostly I think they're lies, aren't they? They're certainly overstated, inflated and exaggerated. I think a lot of people think about Easter, resurrection talk.

What we do here as Christians a little bit in that way. It's like advertising. It's a bit overstated, exaggerated and inflated. The interesting thing is that Jesus always welcomed questions.

[2 : 10] In fact, he welcomed hostile questions. And in the little passage in Mark 12, it's the only time in Jesus' ministry where he is asked point blank specifically about the resurrection by a group of people who are hostile to him.

It takes place in the temple. It's a day or two before he's crucified and rises from the dead. And the aim of the group in asking him is not they don't want a real answer. They want to ridicule Jesus and any idea of the resurrection.

We're introduced to them in the first verse. If you just look down halfway down the right hand column on page 848. And Sadducees came to him who say that there is no resurrection.

Now, there are a number of groups within the Israeli leadership at the time. And the Sadducees were a smallish group of very wealthy landowners, a kind of an aristocracy in Jerusalem.

They dominated the gossip columns. They controlled all the keyboards in Jerusalem, particularly the Sanhedrin. They were highly intelligent, thought of themselves as highly superior, cynical, and they had a stranglehold on the temple, the control of the temple.

[3 : 26] And more than any other group in the Jewish leadership, they were responsible for Jesus' execution. They had a very strangely familiar West Coast spirituality.

They liked to believe in God, but they were very this-worldly. Yes, good to believe in God and live a good life, but they rubbished the idea of heaven or hell or judgment or afterlife or resurrection.

They were focused on this life now, which suited them very well, thank you very much. And they very much liked the idea of living here and had no time whatsoever for what comes after death.

And the idea of resurrection was preposterous to them. So when they come and ask Jesus this question, their motivation is not they want a real answer. They want to discredit Jesus. And Jesus gives them two answers in our little passage, and both of Jesus' answers start in the form of a question.

So we have three questions for the price of one this morning. One from the Sadducees and two from Jesus. And I've called them inside the box, outside the box, and beyond the box.

[4 : 42] And I apologize profusely for using management consulting language. Because when I use the box, I'm talking about the ultimate box. The box we will all be placed in when we die, the coffin.

Just to get that clear. So the Sadducees' question is inside the box. Jesus' first answer, first question is outside the box and then beyond the box. So let's look inside the box.

In the first little paragraph, verses 19 to 23, the Sadducees are absolutely committed to seeing everything from a purely human point of view.

It's common sense, isn't it? People are born. People die. There's nothing more. Humans do not rise from the dead. When we die, we're gone, gone, gone.

We are annihilated. No part of us continues. There's no continuation after death, they say, except if you have children. And that's why they begin the way they do back in Moses' law, verse 19.

[5 : 42] Teacher, they say, polite approach. They don't think of him as teacher. Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife and leaves no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.

And this is an Old Testament law. Where if a man marries a wife and it's partly for the protection of the widow and it's partly for the protection of the family name, if he dies without leaving children, his brother, younger brother, may take the widow and marry her and continue the family name.

And it's interesting, I can only think of two times in the Old Testament where it actually happens. And both times the men are running as far as they can and the women are pursuing them. That's for another week. It's very, very important to the Sadducees to show how silly the resurrection is. Jesus has made public the fact that he will rise from the dead. If you've read Mark's gospel, three times by now he specifically said, I will be killed and three days later I will rise. And from the beginning of the gospel, Jesus has presented himself as the one who has come to defeat death. We have had no fewer than 13 stories, 13 illustrations, where Jesus shows power over death in all sorts of forms, from healing people with leprosy to incurable disease to raising a girl who had physically died.

[7 : 07] And the popularity of Jesus was growing and it deeply threatened the Sadducees. Because Jesus had given ordinary people something that was very, very dangerous indeed.

Real hope. Not just promises for the future. And he backed it up with demonstrations of power of reversing death. And there's nothing like real hope to undermine the authority of those who have positions of authority but have no real power.

And so Jesus' actions and Jesus' promises and Jesus' talk about the resurrection are a menace to the Sadducees and he has to be stopped. So you can see where they're going, can't you?

Jesus, they say to him, if you look at the Bible, God has already provided a way for us to live after we die. The only way is having children. This is the law of God.

It's his idea. The idea of resurrection is absurd. And in verse 19, the word they use to raise up children, it's the resurrection word. The only kind of resurrection they believe in is posterity.

[8 : 11] You know, your reputation continuing through children being raised up. There's no personal life after death in a resurrected body. No, no. The only kind of resurrection is continuing the family name.

You often hear this at funerals, don't you? Uncle Bob, I will never forget you. You live on in my heart. Or Susan will obviously live on in her beautiful children.

We'll go on living. You might have said that yourself. And it's completely understandable. Death is not the way things are supposed to be. Don't let anyone tell you there's dignity in death.

The idea that people live on in their children is very nice. But by itself, that's the only thing we have. It's pathetic. If all we can say is that someone lives on in the memories of others and in the lives of their children, we live inside the box and our thinking is inside the box.

And that's the punch of their question in verses 20 to 23, which was read for us. It's brilliant. This is an old chestnut. And you can hear people starting to laugh as they ask this long-winded question to Jesus.

[9 : 27] And I'm going to put it in modern English, okay? Imagine there were seven brothers. Let's call them Malcolm, Marcus, Mendel, Michael, Montgomery, Morrison, Murdoch.

Just for the sake of the story. Malcolm, the eldest, he takes a wife. Let's call her name Patience. Everything goes well.

But soon after the marriage, he dies suddenly under very strange circumstances, leaving no children whatsoever. And because they're a law-abiding family and Malcolm's died, second in line,

Marcus steps up and he marries Patience.

And before they have a chance to have any children, he also dies, which seems very strange to everyone concerned. Then brother three, Mendel, steps up to the plate.

And by brother three, Patience is asking herself, is it my cooking? Should I keep using those leftovers for so long? And just as Malcolm died with no children and Marcus left no children and Mendel and Michael and Montgomery, when it comes to the final two, to Morrison and Murdoch, they're either very brave or not too bright because exactly the same thing happens to them.

[10:46] And finally, Patience dies. Patience, verse 23. In the resurrection, Jesus, when they rise again, whose wife will she be?

For the seven had her as wife. You see? Gotcha. See how stupid it is to believe in the resurrection? God has already told us and made specific provision for how we will continue when we die.

See what they're doing? If you're silly enough to believe in the resurrection, then it's going to be mightily embarrassing, especially for God. How is God going to sort it out? I mean, God invented monogamy and serial monogamy?

He's going to look very silly on that day. Come on, Jesus. Who really will be married to her in heaven? And despite the fact that they mean the question to ridicule Jesus and the resurrection, it may be a real question for some of us, probably most of us, if you are someone whose spouse has died and you've remarried or if you've divorced and been remarried.

It's a very real question. So what does Jesus say? And he has two answers in the forms of questions. And we move from inside the box. His first answer I've called outside the box.

[12:04] It's the next two verses. Let me read the first one, verse 24. Jesus said to them, here's the question, is this not the reason you are wrong? Because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.

Now, I thought that was one of the words we weren't allowed to use these days. You can say inappropriate or I don't like it, but you can't use the word wrong. We can't use right or wrong, can we?

I mean, that assumes that there is right and wrong and that I know what it is. So I looked at this word and it's not the usual English word for wrong. It simply means, it doesn't mean something nasty and evil that I've done.

It simply means wandering off the trail. So if you're on the West Coast Trail, you stick to the trail. If you begin to wander off the trail, you may never find it again. That's what the word means.

It's a great kindness of Jesus to use this word with the Pharisees, sorry, the Sadducees. He's saying to them, you're way off base, you're in danger. It's not a minor correction to your theological GPS.

[13:08] You're wandering like sheep without a shepherd and you're in danger of being so completely lost with all your clever questions. You need to come back to the path before it's too late. He says, you're off track in two ways.

First, you do not know the scriptures, which would have been a terrible shock for the Sadducees to hear. That is the one thing they thought they were experts in, the scriptures. They had mastered the scriptures.

And I think it's very interesting that often it's at the point of our greatest strength that we are most vulnerable. It's the point of our greatest strength where we resist God.

He says, you don't know the scriptures and you don't know the power of God because they belong together. You see, there is a way of knowing the Bible, of being associated with Christian things in church without having any real experience of the power of God.

It's the way of the closed mind. It's not being humble when God says something in his word with which you disagree. And what we do is we hold on to our own prejudice and our own certainty.

[14:15] And in the end, we make a God in our own image. We reduce him to human size God, to God in our box. We conceive of God, not as he really is or in his own terms, but on our terms.

We squeeze him into our framework and into our mental grid. So we dismiss what he's saying. So I want to say, if you've never been threatened or challenged by what's said in the Bible, if you've never been offended and changed by what God says in the Bible, you do not know the power of God.

That's what he's saying. And I think we are so comfortable with our spiritual opinions, we hold forth on them. But when it comes to the resurrection from the dead, it's a very dangerous game.

And I urge you to listen carefully to what Jesus says, because it'll be a terrible thing to wake on that last day and discover that you were wrong, that you were astray, that God meant what he said about sin and salvation and judgment, and that the own view that you've clung to so comfortably all your life was in fact not true.

But that's why we're here, isn't it? And see, for Jesus, the scriptures and the power of God go together because we cannot change our own minds.

[15:38] We cannot climb out of the box by ourselves. We can't think our way out of the box. It can only happen to us when we experience the power of God through the word of God.

And Jesus continues in this first answer outside the box. He says this, verse 25, for when they rise from the dead, he just assumes they will, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

The Sadducees assumed that resurrection life was just this life, but longer and longer and longer because they had reduced God to the size of their own experience. But Jesus says, when they rise from the dead, and then he speaks about the experience of resurrection from inside those who are going to be raised.

And you would be absolutely amazed at what the commentaries do with this verse. I mean, there are some amazing theories in the commentaries about procreation and sex and intimacies in heaven.

Even the best commentaries think that marriage is irrelevant in heaven, which, if you're blessed to have a happy marriage, is a hard thing to hear, I think. But I can only tell you what it says without any theories.

[17:02] And the only thing Jesus actually says about marriage here is that there is no process in the afterlife of getting married. He says nothing whatsoever about the state of singleness or the state of marriage.

He says nothing about sexuality or love or procreation because that is not his point. His point is that resurrection depends completely on the power of God.

It's not a projection of this life, our hopes in this life. It's not a matter of fulfilling human potential. It's a transformation by the personal power of God as we enter into a new quality of life where our existence will be as different as it is now, as the angels are from us now.

And we don't know a lot about angels, but this we do know. We know that they don't die. They are deathless. Do you understand? Jesus is taking us completely outside the box.

He's saying you can't evaluate the resurrection life from the terms of life in this world. If you do, you fail to do this. You fail to take account of the power of God. It's not moving house.

[18:18] It's recreation. It's not prolonged life, just on and on and on. Resurrection is not being resuscitated back into this life. It's being raised in bodies which are glorious and immortal and eternal, like the body of Jesus was when he raised from the dead.

It's not just an extension, on and on and on. We don't just go to a place where there's clean streets and little crime. It's a new heaven and a new earth. It's a new creation. And I think there's a great deal of Sadducee thinking around where we reduce God to our size.

You know, through our church history, a lot of people have thought that if you die in a fire or if your body is blown to bits, God can't raise you from the dead. So, mid-Victorian England, they began to bury themselves in lead-lined coffins because when God came back, he'd have all the bits to put us back together.

That's completely reducing God back to our size. As though the creator of the universe, the galaxies and the neutrinos, somehow going to run out of atoms and molecules in the resurrection. So, lots of people have put forward the idea, no, we float around on clouds as spirits without bodies. The point Jesus is making is that the realities of our life and our experience now are inadequate to explain the resurrection.

[19:51] That our imaginations are limited. That when we rise from the dead, it will be in bodies that will be irradiated by the glory of God and it bursts the limits of what we can talk about.

Is death stronger than God who created the world? Will it defeat him in the end? No, no, no. But it's so hard to talk about. It's like trying to describe a beautiful sunset to a child that's still within its mother's womb or the taste of chocolate ice cream and butterscotch on top of caramel pie with... I'm going astray. You see, it's fabulous because our hope our hope doesn't rest on what we can imagine.

Our hope rests on the power of God. That's what Jesus is saying. He doesn't spell out the details. But whatever marriage is and whatever good and brilliant it does in this life, resurrection, it'll be better.

And we will no longer be subject to death but we'll share the life of God with each other forever. And that's Jesus' first answer. He takes us outside the box. And his second answer, I've called beyond the box.

[21 : 03] That's verses 26 and 27. Let me just read those to you so they're in your mind again. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses in the passage about the bush how God spoke to him saying, 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. You are quite wrong. Same word again. So Jesus now takes the Sadducees back to their own scriptures and now he speaks not from inside the box, not even from within the experience of those being raised, but he speaks from God's point of view. And did you notice, he says, as for the dead being raised. It's passive. Because resurrection is not something we can do to ourselves.

It's something that happens to us. We don't raise ourselves. It doesn't come out of us. There's nothing inevitable or automatic about resurrection. The Bible nowhere teaches that we are immortal.

The Bible does not teach that we have human bodies and immortal souls that live on after the dead. That's Plato. That's not the Bible. Immortality is in the hand of God and he gives it to those he raises from the dead.

[22 : 29] And so Jesus takes them back to this brilliant passage of the burning bush when God appears and the eternity of God comes in burning purity down on a piece of kindling and doesn't consume it.

It makes it fiery and shiny and that's a picture of what he's doing with all of us. And in that moment the thing to know about what God said to Moses is this, that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the patriarchs lived a good seven to eight hundred years before Moses' day.

And God had made promises to the patriarchs to Abraham, to Isaac and Jacob that he had not finished fulfilling. He cared for them when they were alive seven, eight hundred years ago but he hadn't delivered on his very big promise and that was to bring them into the new garden of Eden. So, when God appears to Moses he says, I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob and the reason that I am about to fulfill, the reason I am about to deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt is to fulfill the covenant promise to the patriarchs.

In other words, death does not stop the purpose of God. What's very important to understand about the promises of God is they're not like our human promises, you know, I'll visit your grave after you die.

[23 : 54] What God promised to the patriarchs is for their enjoyment, for their possession and he hasn't come through yet. see, resurrection has to happen and that's why when God describes the land to Moses he describes it in terms of a new Eden, a land flowing with milk and honey because that's the heart of the promise that he made to Abraham and it's still to happen and that's exactly what Abraham believed.

Abraham knew that God was able to raise him from the dead. We read that Abraham looked forward to a heavenly city whose designer and maker is God. Abraham died in faith not having received what God promised and that's why God is proud to be called his God.

So when God speaks to Moses and reveals himself to Moses he does not speak about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the past tense but in the present. They are living and present to him and because God had made promises to them that he's going to fulfill to them he stands behind them and his promises always create a relationship which goes on and cannot be ended by death. So the issue that Jesus is pressing on the Sadducees is the very nature and character of God himself.

If you think from a human perspective just inside the box Abraham, Isaac and Jacob they died a long time ago but God indicates they're alive and secure in me and I'm going to fulfill my plans toward them in the future because I'm God.

[25 : 32] It's very important. The resurrection is not about me living after I die. It's not about you living after you die. The resurrection is whether God is God and whether he can fulfill his promises.

It's not about our individual survival. That's not what's at stake. It's God's purpose in creation and redemption. It's his purpose in sending Christ and raising him from the dead.

And I wish I could say more this morning but we've run out of time. What we celebrate today is it's hard to put it into words.

The God has raised Jesus from the dead and the promised resurrection has now begun. It's started. And if you keep reading Mark's gospel and I urge you to take it this afternoon and read it through, you'll follow Jesus through the Garden of Gethsemane, through his betrayal, to the mock trial and into the trial in front of Pilate where he's handed over to 600 guards where he's beaten and mocked and stripped and whipped.

And they lead him out and they nail him to a cross and he breathes his last and dies. And in the last chapter God raises him from the dead. And we cannot contain what God has done in the person of Jesus Christ within the confines of our experience.

[26 : 57] When God created the world he had resurrection in mind. When he rescued the people from Egypt he had resurrection in mind. When he sent his son who died on the cross and raised him from the dead he overturned our human thinking and he opened the box so that we might have a hope which is a living hope based on the power of God.

A hope of Jesus Christ himself. My wife and I are moving houses in a couple of weeks and we know where we're going and it's great. We still live in our old house and we keep it clean, we keep it warm and we pay the bills and I'm not looking forward to the day where we actually move but the fact that we're going to a new place it changes every decision that we make in our old house.

Everything that's not completely necessary is being ruthlessly evicted by my wife and I'm very fortunate I'm still there.

Those things that have been hiding in the corners for many years that are important they're back in place now. And what would it be if we were to I'm nearly finished it's fine really.

I'm sorry. Does anyone else feel a bit the same way? It's okay.

[28 : 39] Imagine the place we're going to is three times better than it actually is or three million times better. And imagine we didn't have a lease but we were able to own it for 15 years or 15 million years or 15 centuries or whatever it is.

And we didn't move as we are with our tired old bodies but we moved with new bodies which are eternal and glorious and we didn't move by ourselves we moved in with all of you who love the Lord and we didn't live there by ourselves but we lived with Jesus Christ himself in face to face fellowship eating from the tree of life and drinking the living water.

I think that would be a very poor picture of the reality of the resurrection that is promised to each one of us. Amen.