

Mark 12:18-27. Resurrection: God's Life-Commitment

Are we in fairy-tale land when we talk about resurrection?

On a website an atheist said this about Christians who teach the resurrection:

Dawkins is right, we need to stop indoctrinating children in absurd and unfounded cultural myths because some of them grow up to like Mssrs. Stroebel, Habermas, Lane Craig and a host of others desperately trying to convince the rest of us that their articles of faith have "gotta be true" There's another billion people or more who believe that Mohammed flying to heaven on a winged horse is an indisputable historical fact too. We need to grow out of this stuff!

Richard Dawkins says about Christian claims concerning Jesus' resurrection: "It's so petty, it's so trivial, it's so local, it's so earth-bound, it's so unworthy of the universe." He was asked, "What do you think happened to the body of Jesus, and how does that tally with the accounts of the resurrection?" He replied,

Presumably what happened to Jesus was what happens to all of us when we die. We decompose. Accounts of Jesus' resurrection and ascension are about as well-documented as Jack and the Beanstalk.

When we teach our children that Jesus' body is not decomposing in a grave, that he rose from the dead, are we telling them a fairy tale, a story like Jack and the Beanstalk? Do we start, "Once upon a time, a long time ago" and end, as we speak of Jesus' resurrection, "And they all lived happily ever after"? Dawkins claims that we are guilty of child abuse for teaching our children this fairy tale is the truth.

In this passage Jesus' opponents, the Sadducees, likewise think belief in the resurrection belongs in fairy-tale land. Like the Pharisees and Herodians in the immediately preceding passage, now the aristocratic Sadducees try to trap Jesus in his talk. In Acts 23:6-8 we read how Paul was able to exploit differences between the two main groups of Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees:

Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." ⁷When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸(The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.)

The Sadducees didn't believe in angels or spirits. They were materialists. They believed, as many do today, that when people die they simply crumble into dust and that's all. No life after death; no bodily resurrection, no immortality of the soul.

Science fiction writer, Isaac Asimov, wrote, "Although the time of death is approaching me, I am not afraid of dying and going to Hell or (what would be considerably worse) going to the popularized version of Heaven. I expect death to be nothingness and, for removing me from all possible fears of death, I am thankful to atheism."

The Sadducees pedal their own version of philosophical materialism by telling a story which to their minds makes nonsense of the idea of life after death. Many scholars believe that, like the Samaritans, the Sadducees only recognised the authority of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Unsurprisingly, then, in their hypothetical case study they appeal to Deuteronomy 25:5:

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her.

These slimy characters are insinuating that it is precisely this woman's obedience to the law that makes the whole idea of bodily resurrection so absurd. They are doing what many do today when they oppose foundational truths - improperly using the Bible itself to attack biblical truths they reject. In their cunning, the Sadducees slip in an allusion to Genesis 38:8:

Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother."

Here Judah calls on Onan to obey Deuteronomy 25:5 and, literally, "raise up" children for his deceased brother. The Sadducees, playing with words, insinuate that the only resurrection they believe in is the 'raising up' of children; that the only way a man can preserve a lasting name for himself is by 'raising up' children, since no-one is 'raised up' physically after death. But they also insinuate: "If God himself, by the very means he himself provided as per Deuteronomy 25:5, cannot 'raise up' children for any of these dead men, then how absurd to suppose God will 'raise up' a dead man himself?"

The story itself is based on a second century BC Jewish writing called the Book of Tobit, which tells of a young woman named Sarah who lives in the land of Media. In her despair she prays she might die, having lost seven husbands to a demon named Asmodeus, who abducted and killed each husband on their wedding night before the marriage could be consummated. In response, God sends an angel named Raphael, disguised as a human, to free Sarah from the demon. But when the Sadducees retell this story they deliberately leave out any mention of angels, insinuating that to believe in resurrection is as bone-headed as believing in angels.

Why do people reject the reality of resurrection?

Jesus responds, "*Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?*" (v24). They don't know the Scriptures because they wrongly assumed the 'raising up' of a dead man is not taught in the Pentateuch. They don't know God's power because they think if God finds it hard to "raise up" children for a man, then it's completely unrealistic to think of him 'raising up' a dead man.

Take a closer look at the example presented by the Sadducees. They start, "*Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child.*"

Now consider what Paul says in Romans 7:1-3:

Or do you not know brothers (for I speak to those who know the law) that the law rules over a person [only] as long as that person lives? For the married woman is bound by law to a living husband. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of the husband. So then, while her husband lives, she will be called an adulteress if she is joined to another man. But if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so as not to be an adulteress even though she is joined to another man.

How do our marriage vows go? "Till death do us part." Death annuls a marriage covenant, which is why the woman is free to remarry each time a husband dies. Yet, illogically, they ask: "*At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?*" They are hoisted by their own petard. For if death indeed annuls a covenant then when the woman dies all previous covenants are annulled. Which is why Jesus continues: "*When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.*"

Then comes Jesus' master-stroke, when he demonstrates that the Pentateuch itself, as shown by Exodus 3:6, does indeed teach bodily resurrection: "*Now about the dead rising - have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken.*"

What are the foundations for our belief in the resurrection?

It is common for Christians to base their belief in the resurrection of the dead on the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection.

We must be crystal clear that you cannot call yourself a Christian if you do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Even the famous atheist Christopher Hitchens recognizes this. A woman said to him, "The religion you cite in your book is generally the fundamentalist faith of various kinds. I'm a liberal Christian, and I don't take the stories from the scripture literally. I don't believe in the doctrine of atonement (that Jesus died for our sins, for example). Do you make any distinction between fundamentalist faith and liberal religion?" Hitchens replied, "I would say that if you don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you're really not in any meaningful sense a Christian."

In 1815 a great battle was fought and the future of Europe depended on its outcome - the Battle of Waterloo in Belgium, when the army of the all-conquering Napoleon clashed with the army of the Duke of Wellington. Across the English channel the English people anxiously awaited news of the result. In those days the only way to communicate the result was through a system of signal lights flashed across the English channel. After the battle was over lights began to flash. But the fog was so thick that only part of the message could be made out. It read, "Wellington defeated." On hearing this news English hearts plunged into despair. But then the fog lifted and the entire message could be made out: "Wellington defeated the enemy."

That's what the movement from death to resurrection in Jesus' own experience means for us. If Jesus merely died on the cross and his body is rotting in some grave then our gospel becomes the despairing news, "Jesus defeated." Once the god of this world blinded us. But God has shone the light into our hearts, the fog has lifted and the gospel message comes to us loud and clear, as we celebrate the glorious bodily resurrection of our Lord: "Jesus defeated the enemy."

Shakespeare has Hamlet ask:

Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn

*No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?*

Why are people prepared to grunt and sweat, while bearing such heavy loads or fardels of suffering and hardship in this weary life? So Hamlet wonders. Because, he answers, they dread the even greater sufferings they might face in the life they will experience after death. Hamlet calls that state "the undiscovered country." But he adds that no-one who has died, who has traveled from this life into the after-life has ever crossed the boundary between these two countries or worlds. And that is Hamlet's tragic mistake, because one person, one traveler, and only one, has returned from that undiscovered country, our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, yes, the resurrection of Jesus is foundational to our Christian faith. Yet, in 1 Corinthians 15:4, Paul states Jesus "was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." Further, read verse 13. Did Paul say, "But if Christ was not raised from the dead, then there is no resurrection of the dead?" No! He says the very opposite: "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised." Consequently, though Paul makes much of the factual historicity of Christ's resurrection, Christian faith in the resurrection has deeper roots.

The Jesus who was confronted by the Sadducees was fully man. It was he who repulsed Satan's temptation by declaring, "*Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*" Jesus' own life was utterly dependent on God's Word. Why was Jesus so convinced that he himself would rise from the dead? Was it because he had some mystical sixth sense, because he was the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity? I venture to say that, if we are honest, this is how many Christians think about Jesus. But the reality is different. Jesus' conviction was based on his own knowledge of the Scriptures and the power of God. One of the key reasons why Jesus knew he would be raised from the dead was precisely because he took Exodus 3:6 seriously. When Jesus read God saying to Moses "*I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*", Jesus knew this meant that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. When God said these words to Moses they were a promise that just as he had protected the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so he would now protect his people Israel. Jesus knew that his Father had promised to give Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the land of Canaan, along with their descendants and, since the ultimate land we will enter in the new heavens and earth is a physical land, it follows that for this promise to be fulfilled Abraham and all his descendants must also have physical bodies. Further, Jesus knew with all his heart that his own utterly unique experience of life with his Father could never be separated by death. In Hebrews 12:2-3 we read:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In Mark 12 we see Jesus enduring opposition from sinful men, knowing full well that this would all culminate in his death, in the shame and humiliation awaiting him on the cross. But "consider him"; see Jesus modeling the life of faith for us, bearing his fardels of unprecedented suffering not because he dreaded what might lie beyond the grave, but "for the joy set before him." As we follow in Jesus' footsteps, as we too live in an intimate living relationship with God we know that whatever "taking up our

cross" means for us and that no matter how we ourselves might die, that we are prepared for his sake to bear whatever fardels of hardship he may lay upon us, "for the joy set before [us]", when we too one day will share in this glory.