

“I AM”

“This is what you are to say to the Israelites: **I AM** has sent me to you” (Exodus 3:14).
Mark 12:18-27 ¹

As we continue to make our way through Holy Week with the Gospel of Mark, we’re still in the Temple on Tuesday. The chief priests, scribes and elders have challenged Jesus’ authority to speak and act as He does. Jesus has told the parable of the wicked tenants. The Pharisees and the Herodians have tried to trap Jesus with their question about paying taxes to Caesar (we haven’t looked at that yet); and now the Sadducees have come with another trick question.

This is the first and only appearance of the Sadducees in Mark. Whereas the Pharisees appear over eighty times in the Gospels, the Sadducees appear only about a dozen times.²

In New Testament times, the Sadducees were few in number, but they exerted great influence both politically and religiously. Similar to our “political elite” today, the Sadducees were the “Harvard & Yale” folk who “ran the system,” and they ran it largely to their own advantage.

The Sadducees were unpopular with the people, but the powerful and the wealthy were fond of their favor. We have no documents from the Sadducees, and what we know about them comes largely from those who opposed them. After the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Sadducees were never heard from again.

Unlike the Pharisees, who accepted the Law, the Prophets, the Writings, and the Oral Law, the Sadducees regarded only the Torah (the Law, or the Pentateuch) as Scripture, and they rejected any teachings that were not rooted in the Torah. The Pharisees and the Sadducees differed on many theological points and they were political enemies; but even so, Jesus was higher on both of their “hate lists” than they were on each other’s, so the New Testament records several tag-team efforts between the two groups to trap and to discredit Jesus. So, in the present text, now that Jesus has befuddled and embarrassed the Pharisees, the Sadducees moved in to see if they could trap Him with another trick question.

The question had to do with Moses’ “levirate” law³ and the “life to come.” Patrimony and lineage were very important in Israel. Widows were required to remarry within their husbands’ clan so that land would remain within the tribal boundaries Moses had established. The levirate law required that if a man died childless, his brother, or, lacking a brother, some close male kinsman, should marry the widow and raise up a son who would inherit the dead man’s land.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 30, 2018. Parallel and related passages include: Matthew 22:23-33; Luke 20:27-38.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

² The name, “Sadducee,” probably comes from Zadok (*Saddouk* in Greek), who was High Priest during the time of David (2 Samuel 8:17).

³ Genesis 38:1-11; Deuteronomy 25:5-10; from the Latin *levir*, or “brother-in-law.”

In their hypothetical situation, the Sadducees noted that a man died without children, and his brother married the widow as he was supposed to do. Unfortunately, husband #2 also died without children, and five more brothers attempted to do the right thing, but each of them also died childless. So this poor woman, bereaved seven times and with no children to show for her trouble, finally died herself.

The question posed to Jesus was, “Whose wife will she be in the life to come?” Posed as only men would ask it, the question had to do with who was going to have sexual rights to this woman in the life to come.

The question was insincere to its root, since the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection or the life to come at all, finding no evidence of these in the Pentateuch.⁴ And of course, Jesus was well aware that they were trying to discredit Him before the adoring crowds.⁵

Jesus’ response put them back on their heels in several ways. “You are badly mistaken,” He said, “because you know neither the Scripture nor the power of God. In the life to come—and there certainly is a “life to come”—humans will not be married as persons are here. Because all who are counted worthy of resurrection⁶ will experience *eternal* life, there will be no need for marriage or procreation. Those who rise from the dead will be like the angels in that respect.” Jesus affirmed the life to come, the resurrection, and the existence of angels, none of which the Sadducees believed in.

“And here’s another key point about all this,” Jesus continued, “a point that you could have seen in your own Torah study, had you been reading wisely and carefully. When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, God told Moses, ‘I AM the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.’⁷ If you’d been paying attention, you’d have noticed that God said “**I AM** their God”—present tense—not “I *was* their God”—past tense. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You guys need to do your homework.”

Jesus had once again crushed His opponents in the battle of wits, and His continuing conquests added fuel to the fire for their murderous intentions for the week. Jesus’ answer to this conundrum also gives us a good bit to think about with respect to the Life to Come.

In the first place, Jesus’ affirmation of the Life to Come and of the resurrection that takes us into that Life, is GOOD NEWS in all caps. All Paul would later write, “*If the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Those, then, who have fallen asleep in Christ have also*

⁴ But the idea does appear in the prophets. See Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2.

⁵ His response fits what is known as a “chiastic” pattern:

- a. You are in error [*planao*].
- b. You do not know the Scriptures.
- c. You do not know the power of God.
- c.' [The power of God] raises the dead and they become like angels.
- b.' [Scripture is cited] In the bush passage, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is God of the living.
- a.' You are badly mistaken [*planao*].

⁶ See Luke 20:35. Luke’s version of Jesus’ answer raises some interesting theological questions.

⁷ *Then Moses asked God, “If I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what should I tell them?”*

God replied to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever; this is how I am to be remembered in every generation” (Exodus 3:13-15).

perished. *If we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone.*

*“But as it is, **Christ has been raised from the dead**, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. **For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive**” (1 Corinthians 15:16-22).*

Jesus affirmed the reality of the Life to Come, but He also noted that there will be significant differences between that Life and this one. The difference Jesus identified here is that neither marriage nor procreation will be needed in the Life to Come. While the Life to Come will be a New Dimension that we have never experienced, or even imagined, before,⁸ there will also be a certain level of continuity between this life and the next.

A great deal of what we know about the Life to Come comes to us through inference. Think for a moment about Saul’s calling up of the spirit of Samuel before the battle in which Saul was killed. You’ll find this story in 1 Samuel 28.⁹ The main things I want you to notice in this account are that Samuel, though physically dead, still existed in conscious and recognizable form. He remembered what had happened on earth prior to his death, was aware of what was happening on earth right up to the present moment, and he knew what was about to happen.

Or think about Jesus’ parable of *The Rich Man & Lazarus* in Luke 16:19-31. While we need to remember that this is a parable, we need to also remember that Jesus was the one telling this story, and He certainly knew what the True Reality of things is. I think it’s fair for us to assume that the essential aspects of the story are true to what is; and we see then that both the rich man and Lazarus (not Mary & Martha’s brother), though they were physically dead, were still alive on The Other Side.

Both men were conscious and recognizable. Both had entered into the first phase of judgment, whether painful or blessed. Each could see and communicate with the other, and both were aware of current conditions that existed on the earth. And of course, we see that Abraham, though he had physically died nearly 2,000 years before, was still alive, conscious, and recognizable, too.

Or consider this vignette in Revelation 6:9-11: *When he [the Lamb of God] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the word of God and the testimony they had given. They cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, the one who is holy and true, how long until you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?” So they were each given a white robe, and they were told to rest a little longer until the number would be completed of their fellow servants and their brothers and sisters, who were going to be killed as they had been.*

Once again, we find that believers who had died experienced conscious continuity with their lives on earth. These folk not only remembered their earthly lives, but they also remembered that they had been murdered. They knew what was happening on earth, and that their deaths had not yet been avenged. They had direct access to God, experienced the passage of time, and apparently had bodies of some sort that were able to put on white robes.

And, consistent with these vignettes, Jesus told the dying thief on the cross, *“Today you will be with me in paradise”* (Luke 23:43). The apostle Paul later wrote that to die is to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23), and to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2

⁸ See Mark 9:2-3; Revelation 7:9-17.

⁹ 1 Samuel 28:3-25.

Corinthians 5:8). And Hebrews tells us that the believers in heaven are watching our lives and encouraging us to finish our own journeys with complete faithfulness to Christ (Hebrews 12:1).

Until Jesus comes, my friends, we can take both courage and comfort from the Bible's affirmations that our loved ones who have Crossed Over in Christ are with Him *right now* in unimaginable glory, AND that there is greater wonder still to come, on that great and glorious morning when the dead in Christ shall rise (John 5:28-29; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18)!

But there's more. We've seen over and over that the Kingdom of God—that realm where the reign of God is fully accomplished—was the central theme of Jesus' teaching and His ministry. That realm was established on earth in the Garden of Eden, and you may be interested to know that Eden was not destroyed by Adam and Eve's sin. What was destroyed was our ability to live in Eden. The Bible indicates that Eden still exists, though it is not accessible to us, and that the Tree of Life still grows there (Revelation 2:7).

The book of Hebrews tells us that the faithful ancients "*were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them*" (Hebrews 11:16). Notice that Scripture does not say that God *will prepare* a city, or even that God *is preparing* a city. The Bible says that God has prepared it. It exists at this very moment. And we know more about it than you may think.

The Good News is that God's Eternal Plan is still underway, and a time is coming when God will restore *everything* (Acts 3:21), an event that Jesus called "***the renewal of all things***" (Matthew 19:28). Here's how God characterized that event through the prophet Isaiah:

"See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more" (Isaiah 65:17-19).

Referring to this prophecy, Peter wrote, "*That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise **we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells***" (2 Peter 3:12b-13). And when Paul referred to this renewal, he didn't talk about it in terms of death and destruction. He talked about it in terms of childbirth (Romans 8:22).

My friends, God has never given up on the Creation. Yet somehow, we manage to overlook an entire biblical vocabulary that makes this point over and over: **Reconcile. Redeem. Restore. Recover. Return. Renew. Regenerate. Resurrect.** Each of these biblical words suggests a return to an original condition that was ruined or lost."¹⁰ The symmetry is too remarkable to be accidental:

- In Genesis, God plants the Garden on Earth; in Revelation, he brings down the New Jerusalem, with a garden at its center, to the New Earth.
- In Eden, there's no sin, death, or Curse; on the New Earth, there's no *more* sin, death, or Curse.
- In Genesis, the Redeemer is promised; in Revelation, the Redeemer returns.
- Genesis tells the story of Paradise lost; Revelation tells the story of Paradise regained.

¹⁰ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Tyndale, 2004), p. 88.

- In Genesis, humanity’s stewardship is squandered; in Revelation, humanity’s stewardship is triumphant, empowered by the human and divine King Jesus. . . .
- We live in the in-between time, hearing both echoes of Eden and the approaching glory of the New Earth.”¹¹

“What God made us to desire,” Randy Alcorn wrote in his excellent book, *Heaven*, “and therefore what we *do* desire if we admit it, is exactly what God promises to those who follow Jesus Christ: a resurrected life in a resurrected body, with the resurrected Christ on a resurrected Earth. Our desires correspond precisely to God’s plans. It’s not that we want something, so we engage in wishful thinking that what we want actually exists. It’s quite the opposite—the reason we want it is precisely because God has planned for it to exist. Resurrected people living in a resurrected universe is not our idea – it’s God’s plan.”¹²

Friends, you and I long for a perfect world, without the corruption of sin, where God walks with us and talks with us “in the cool of the day,” as was true in Eden (Genesis 3:8). Because we’re physical beings, we desire something tangible and physical, something that will not fade away. We long for something similar to what the Bible describes in the Garden of Eden. **And that is exactly what God promises us—a home that will not be destroyed, a kingdom that will not fade, a city with unshakable foundations, an inheritance eternal and incorruptible, whose architect and builder is God.**¹³

As wonderful as all this is, we do well to remember that **heaven is not our default destination**. The Bible tells us that “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23); and Jesus warned us to “*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*” (Matthew 7:13-14).

Whether we like it or not, and no matter what we may think about the matter, God loves us enough to tell us the Truth—the Truth that there are two eternal destinations, not just one, and **all roads do not lead to Heaven**. Only one path takes us there, and it is the path that begins with The Narrow Gate.

Jesus told us, “***I am the gate, and whoever enters through me will be saved***” (John 10:9). It was Jesus Himself who told us, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6).

No one deserves God’s forgiveness. If we deserved it, we wouldn’t need it. The Bible tells us that “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Corinthians 5:21). And “*if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). If we fail to begin here, we’ll not enter that Great City at all.

There is much more that could be said at this point, but as we close I want to offer two more verses to linger in your mind. The first verse is 1 John 4:18: *We need have no fear of someone who loves us perfectly; his perfect love for us eliminates all dread of what he might do to us. If we are afraid, it is for fear of what he might do to us and shows that we are not fully convinced that he really loves us* (The Living Bible). This is important, so let’s do it again. Would you read it with me?

¹¹ Alcorn, p. 85. Whatever one believes about the Millennium, that need not affect our understanding of the New Creation. Regardless of when and how the present Earth ends, the main point is that the New Creation will then begin.

¹² Alcorn, pp. 7-8.

¹³ Alcorn, p. 78.

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And the second verse I want you to remember is Luke 12:32, which will be the last sentence of what I'm about to read: ²⁹ *And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it.* ³⁰ *For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them.* ³¹ *But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.* ³² ***“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”***

My friends, there is **no fear** in our Father's House. God's plans for your life, both in time and in eternity, are more amazing, more wonderful, than you are able to imagine.

Let God love you. And wear your seat belt.