

Beyond the Veil

Mark 12:18-27

***Are they all lost, the host of dawn?
The saints who opened up my eyes
To Light have left me. All are gone,
Some say, beyond the starry skies.***

***And I am left alone with names
Long since engraved on granite stones.
A cynic deep inside me claims
That those I love are dead, dry bones.***

***And yet my Sovereign's sacred scrolls
Declare they've gone beyond a veil.
So through my midday's toils and tolls
With faith that's feeble, faint and frail,***

***I've trusted in my faithful Friend,
Who says my flesh is but a husk,
And night's the dawning not the end,
So there's no need to fear life's dusk.***

The farm town slept beneath a silver moon. It was past midnight. The city square was deserted. Stores were all shuttered. And the limestone courthouse was dark.

The small town hospital was dark, too. The parking lot was almost empty. And nurses slipped silently down the hallways.

I sat in a metal chair beside a bed where an old man gasped for air. I held his hand and looked at his fingers, knobby and gnarled like limbs on an old oak tree.

One sunny Sunday afternoon a few weeks earlier, I sat beside him as he lay in another bed. The old man was in a nursing home then. Feeble and fearful, he stifled a sob before he spoke.

"Jack," he said, "I'm afraid to die."

We talked a long time that afternoon. And before I left, I promised him he wouldn't have to approach that dark valley alone. I would be with him. Now that final hour had come.

And I prayed he could still feel my hand in his. I felt his pulse pause, then flutter, faint and frail. It paused again, tried to start and failed. The old man was dead.

I drove home down deserted streets past shuttered stores and thought about my old friend. I wondered what happened a moment after his heart failed.

That is the mystery of the ages. Death is a dark veil each of us must pass. But what lies beyond the veil?

That is the question.

Life After Death

The Savior was still teaching on the temple courtyard. But the young zealots were gone. They had dropped their pretense and scurried back to the old men who sent them to trap Jesus.

In their place, smirking Sadducees stood before the Savior. The young disciples had pretended to be pious. But these men didn't bother with masks or masquerades.

They didn't pretend to be sincere seekers. They were proud of what they were: snide skeptics and sneering cynics.

The Pharisees were literalists. As scholars of the scrolls, they accepted the words of the entire Old Testament as the inspired Word of God that was to be both believed and obeyed.

Their obedience to the Law bordered on obsession. And all for one reason. They looked forward to sitting down at a great banquet table in paradise with Abraham after the final resurrection.

The Sadducees scoffed at the very idea any afterlife. They believed in neither angels nor demons, Heaven nor Hell.

Some Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection) came to Jesus, Verse 18

Those Sadducees believed death is the absolute end of conscious experience. In fact, they were smug and sure it is eternal, everlasting, irreversible oblivion.

To prove their point they posed an old problem that always confounded their adversaries, the Pharisees.

Some Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection) came to Jesus, and began questioning Him, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves behind a wife and leaves no child, his brother should marry the wife and raise up children to his brother. There were seven brothers; and the first took a wife, and died leaving no children. The second one married her, and died leaving behind no children; and the third likewise; and so all seven left no children. Last of all the woman died also. Verses 8-22

Moses commanded that if a man died before fathering a child, his brother was to marry the man's widow. And the first child born to that second marriage was to be considered the offspring and heir of the deceased brother.

When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. It shall be that the firstborn whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother, so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. Deuteronomy 25:5-6

In this case, a woman sat by sobbing while seven husbands died. Then she died too, still childless. By Jesus' time marrying a brother had all but died out. So the problem was really just a mind maze: a dilemma designed to disprove the doctrine of life after death.

In the resurrection, when they rise again, which one's wife will she be? For all seven had married her. Verse 23

The Sadducees presented their problem confidently. They thought they knew Jesus. But they didn't. He didn't believe the resurrection is a reality. As the eternal Son of God, He knew it is.

The Master told those men they were mistaken because of two damning deficiencies.

Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God?" Verse 24

Again and again, the Old Testament speaks of a coming resurrection. Daniel's prophecy is one of the clearest.

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:2 (NIV)

However, the Sadducees dismissed Daniel, along with all the other prophets, historical books and psalms. In their minds, only the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, is reliable.

That is a familiar failure. If anyone refuses to believe God's Word is infallibly inspired, foolish mistakes are inevitable. That is why such skeptics never know the infinite, unlimited power of God.

But that wasn't the only problem that plagued the Sadducees. Like the Pharisees, they also assumed any afterlife and its inhabitants would be no different than this life. And Jesus insisted that is wrong.

For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. Verses 25

Those who trust only in Christ as their crucified Savior and risen Lord will not only be raised up from the grave. They will also be utterly, absolutely and eternally changed.

...we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 1 Corinthians 15:51-52

It is a grand and glorious truth that we shall be forever changed. However, for many believers, our Lord's words are needlessly troubling. Husbands and wives worry that they will no longer love one another in Heaven as they do here.

But this debate between the Savior and the Sadducees was not about marriage. The subject was really children: offspring and heirs.

Our Lord's point is that there will be no procreation in Heaven. There, human beings will be like the angels are now. And as eternal beings, angels have no offspring.

Jesus once told a story about a wealthy man and a beggar named Lazarus. After both men died, the wealthy man was in the fires of Hell. But even from a great distance, he recognized Lazarus as the beggar who once sat beside his mansion gate.

And that is not all. The rich man still loved and worried about his brothers, too. So we need not fret that Heaven will extinguish earthly relationships.

But we should be very concerned that we believe God's Word. It is the only path to knowing God in all His power.

For if we never choose to know our Maker in all His might and majesty, we will be left like the Sadducees.

Living out a life on earth with death within and death to come.

Life Before Death

On the temple courtyard, Jesus affirmed that death is not the end of conscious experience. There is indeed life after death.

But that life does not begin when a human heart stops beating. It must begin here and now in this life. Or it will never begin at all. And our Savior said if we trust Him, it not only can begin. It will.

...anyone who listens to My message and believes in God who sent Me has eternal life, and will never be damned for his sins, but has already passed out of death into life. John 5:24 (TLB)

Eternal life doesn't begin when our flesh grows cold. It begins, indeed it must begin now. If we don't have eternal life now, we cannot hope to have it after death stills the beating of our heart.

Luke added that Christ also carefully defined precisely who will inherit the promise of an eternity in God's celestial city.

...those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead...are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. Luke 20:35,36

On the island of Patmos, the apostle John was given a glimpse of Heaven. In that vision he saw both angels and elders, seraphs and saints gathered around God's throne, praising the Lord Jesus.

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. Revelation 5:12

God's sinless Son is not only worthy. He alone is worthy. And it is more than a mistake; it is a tragic blunder to attempt to be declared worthy of eternity in Heaven through our own efforts.

...a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, Galatians 2:16

If we are to know the power of God and experience the light and life of His presence, we must trust in His Son. He alone is worthy.

He not only lived a perfect life. He also shed His blood and laid down His life to pay the penalty for our sins.

When we choose to trust in Jesus, we are forever forgiven for all our failures. His precious Holy Spirit comes to live within us.

And we are adopted into the Father's forever family as His beloved children. That adoption is proof positive of our eternal life.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, 1 John 3:2 (ESV)

John had lived a long life, loving and trusting Jesus when he wrote those words. Still, he did not know precisely how we will be changed. But he did know that if we are God's children now, one day we will be changed and remade into the image of our Lord.

We know we will be changed for another reason, too. If we love and live for the Lord Jesus now, the change has already begun.

Life Without Death

The subject of the Savior's teaching was not merely the raising of dead bodies. After all, the Sadducees did not believe in conscious experience between the grave and that final resurrection, either.

So our Lord also provided proof that we will be with God long before our bodies live again.

But regarding the fact that the dead rise again, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? Verse 26

The Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the Bible as God's Word. So our Savior chose a passage from Exodus to prove His point.

When Moses was an eighty-year-old desert shepherd, he saw a bush that burned but was not consumed. And when he approached it, he heard God speaking to him.

I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Exodus 3:6

There is no doubt our Savior understood the Scriptures are infallibly inspired. In fact, He knew divine inspiration even extends to the tense of the verbs.

And God did not say He *was* the God of the patriarchs. He said He *is* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The cynical Jews who stood before the Savior that day believed death is extinction. But the living Lord couldn't be the God of people who no longer exist.

After all, those Sadducees could go to a cave at Machpelah. And there they would find the bleached bones and decayed dust of the patriarchs.

At that time, Abraham had been dead for more than 1600 years. And Jacob's body had been in the grave for much more than a millennium. Yet, the Creator said He was still the God of those men. So they had to be consciously existing somewhere.

Also, in the Savior's story, the rich man actually saw Abraham in Heaven. The patriarch's bones were in a cave on earth. But he was alive and aware with God.

Death was not the end of existence for those faithful men of old. And it will not be the end for those who trust in Jesus today.

Actually, those faithful men of God did not really die at all. Yes, their bodies died. But their souls and spirits lived on.

That is the promise the Master offered Martha when her brother's body lay decaying in a hillside cave.

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. John 11:25-26 (NIV)

That is our Savior's sure and certain promise. If we trust in Him, we will be given eternal life. Not someday soon, but the exact instant we receive Christ as our Savior and Lord.

Then when our body grows frail and feeble, we can take heart. Death is not a vast darkness. It is just a veil, a door thrown open to the life and light and love of Heaven.

...and so we shall always be with the Lord. 1 Thessalonians 4:17

In the upper room, Thomas was absent when the Savior showed Himself alive after His resurrection on Easter morning. And when Thomas returned, he doubted the disciples' story.

However, after Jesus appeared again and urged Thomas to touch His wounds, the doubting disciple was convinced.

Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" John 20:28

Jesus had been Thomas' faithful friend. But now the Master was much more. He was the disciple's Lord and God. That is proof positive Thomas was alive, never, ever to die.

He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; you are greatly mistaken. Verse 27

However, there is a tragic flip side to our Savior's teaching about eternity. There is no hope of Heaven for those who cannot sincerely say with Thomas, "Jesus Christ is my own personal Lord and God."

But that doesn't mean death will be the end of conscious experience for unbelievers like the Sadducees. They will still see and hear and feel. But there will be no life for them.

Rejecting the life that is found only by knowing, trusting and loving the Lord Jesus Christ here and now is choosing death. And we cannot choose death now and be assured of life when our heart is still and our flesh is cold. God is Lord of the living.

Not the dead.