

Discipleship According to Mark

Jesus on the Afterlife (Mark 12:18-27)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at Houston Chinese Church on August 16, 2026

Introduction

- ❖ This morning's passage addresses the common thread that connects all of us in this room and connects all of us to every man, woman, and child across the globe and across all time. That common thread also connects us intimately with the biblical characters we encounter in our texts. **That common thread is our human mortality.**
 - All of us experience life. And all of us will experience death. Our bodies will fail. Our brains will cease to function. Our lungs will quit breathing. Our hearts will stop beating. One day we will die.
 - That's not breaking news. That shouldn't surprise any of us. That is—and has been—the reality for anyone living in our Genesis 3 world on this side of the Fall. Death is our inevitable fate. **Now in modern times, we've certainly gotten better at delaying death and extending the average life span.** That's a good thing. **But we've been unsuccessful at deterring death altogether.**
- ❖ But that hasn't stopped people from trying. I was recently listening to a podcast interview of **Bryan Johnson**. He's a tech entrepreneur who's been in the news for Blueprint. It's a wellness brand promoting products and protocols for reducing disease risk and slowing the pace of aging. But it's more than a company, it's his personal experiment.
 - **Bryan Johnson has put his body through countless treatments, therapies, and strict protocols with the singular purpose of not dying.** His moonshot vision is for us to be the first generation of the human race to not die. He thinks it's now possible to extend life long enough for future science and AI-sourced technology to produce age-reversing therapies. His company's motto is: Don't Die.
 - Some might mock him for being vain and refusing to age gracefully. But I think he sounds serious and sincere in his aims. He represents a deeply human desire to preserve life, to avoid suffering, and to control our destiny.
- ❖ It's a normal human instinct to fear death. And there are many different ways to respond to that fear. **One response is represented in our passage by the Sadducees.** As I'll explain later, they not only denied the concept of resurrection, they denied the afterlife. **They tried to cope of the natural fear of death by demystifying it.** By defanging it. By arguing that there's nothing awaiting you after death—neither reward nor punishment. Just nothingness.
 - Now that was a minority view in ancient times and medieval times. But by modern times, it's become the prevailing view on death in the secular West. Dying can still be a scary thought, but it's far less frightful if you don't think you'll face any eternal consequence for how you lived this life. That's how most of your secular neighbors cope with death. That kind of thinking stretches all the way back to NT times.
 - But now in our day—because of rapid advancements in science and technology—people like Bryan Johnson are convinced we can go further. **Why settle with braving the existential finality of death with a stiff upper lip?** Why can't we engineer a way around it or eradicate death altogether?

- ❖ So those are two human impulses. To demystify and defang our inevitable death. Or to go further and delay death. Maybe deter it altogether. Rendering it no longer inevitable. **But notice how both impulses to that common fear of death is to seek control.**
 - But that's the problem. Neither impulse will sufficiently address our fears. **Because the opposite of fear is *not* control. It's trust.** That's Jesus's impulse. That's how he responds to our common fear of death. By pointing to the truth of Scripture and the power of God and calling us to trust. That's what we'll see in our text.
 - I've divided this episode in Mark's Gospel into three parts. First, we'll consider the Sadducees and their assumptions. Then, we'll listen to the Christ and his response. And third, we'll talk about the Resurrection and its implications.

The Sadducees and Their Assumptions

- ❖ Let's first look at the Sadducees and the assumptions behind their question. This is the first time they appear in Mark's Gospel. The Sadducees were a particular sect of 1st-century Judaism. Made up of a small, elite group of wealthy priests. They were the power brokers in Jerusalem because they were in charge of the temple.
 - **A key trait distinguishing the Sadducees from other groups like the Pharisees was their anti-supernatural belief system.** They rejected the existence of angels, miracles, and the afterlife. That's affirmed in v18. The Sadducees "*say that there is no resurrection.*" A resurrection is a miracle after all and involves the afterlife.
 - So they rejected the idea of a *bodily* resurrection. But they went even further than that. They didn't even think your soul would continue on in another plane of existence. **The Sadducees taught that, after death, you simply ceased to exist.** They believed there is no afterlife. Which therefore means there's no future judgment; no heaven or hell; no rewards or punishments.
- ❖ **Now some have tried to make a comparison between ancient Sadducees to modern deists.** In that both affirm one Creator God while rejecting certain beliefs about the supernatural. But there's a key difference. Modern deism grounds its rejection of the supernatural in a highly intellectual rationalism.
 - **The Sadducees, on the other hand, were religious Jews who grounded their beliefs in a narrow biblicism.** They only recognized the authority of the first five books of Moses (the Torah) and rejected any doctrine that couldn't be established from it. Which is why they say there's no resurrection. It's not in the Torah.
- ❖ Now the Pharisees were their chief rivals. Partly because they held contrasting theological views. **The Pharisees recognized the authority of not just the Torah but the rest of the OT as we know it, including the rabbinic traditions.** So they believed in miracles, in angels, and the afterlife. Particularly in a future resurrection of the dead. Which was the majority view among Jews in Jesus's day. Which is why the Sadducees just assumed Jesus held beliefs similar to the Pharisees.

- ❖ But here's an important distinction. **When the Pharisees spoke of the afterlife, they described it largely as a straight-line continuation of life on earth.** Of course, vastly renewed and improved. But most Jews in those days assumed that, even after the resurrection, our present-day relationships and commitments remain unchanged. If you are married in this life, you'll remain married to that person in the next. As we'll see, Jesus believed something different.
- ❖ But that's what the Pharisees and most Jews believed and that's the underlying assumption in the question posed by the Sadducees in v19. Now before we read it again, there's another assumption that needs to be explained. **In their question to Jesus, the Sadducees refer to an ancient practice known as levirate marriages.**
 - It was a practice even they would've endorsed because it's taught in the Torah. In Deuteronomy 25, the Law of Moses taught that, if a man dies without any children, his brother is obliged to marry the childless widow in order to sire children in his dead brother's name.
- ❖ **An important point to make is that this arrangement was *not* considered polygamy.** Yes, you're responsible to bear that widow a child and provide for them. But that's your dead brother's child. And your dead brother's land and inheritance will pass on to that kid. So it was *not* considered a polygamous marriage. It was a provision in the Law to protect the widow and to perpetuate your dead brother's name and inheritance into the next generation.
 - So keep that in mind. The Sadducees's question only makes sense if everyone there—including Jesus—share the same assumption. **That God's design for marriage is inherently monogamous. That polygamy is rejected in the kingdom of God.** I know there are examples of OT characters involved in polygamous marriages. But *describing* what they did is not the same as *prescribing* it. There is no biblical endorsement of polygamy. The Sadducees, in posing this hypothetical to Jesus, were assuming everyone agrees that marriage is intended by God to be monogamous.
- ❖ Now with those assumptions laid bare, let's read again, ¹⁹*“Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. 20There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring. 21And the second took her, and died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. 22And the seven left no offspring. Last of all the woman also died. 23In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife.”*
 - So they construct this hypothetical scenario where the same woman ends up marrying seven brothers. All of whom leave her with no offspring. **So if there is a supposed resurrection of the dead, then when they all rise again, whose wife will she be?**
 - The idea of a woman being married simultaneously to seven men in the afterlife was considered so ridiculous that the Sadducees are saying, “See, that's why we think the idea of a resurrection is equally ridiculous.”

- ❖ I'm not surprised if this was a theological conundrum that had stumped the Pharisees. Perhaps they had already been posed this question and had yet to come up with an adequate answer. So the Sadducees wanted to use it on Jesus to embarrass him. To make him and his teachings look equally ridiculous.

The Christ and His Response

- ❖ But Jesus is no fool. And his response demonstrates it. Let's shift gears and look now at the Christ and his response to the Sadducees. His response is that both Sadducees and Pharisees are misunderstanding either the Word of God, or the power of God, or both.
 - Look with me at v24, "²⁴*Jesus said to them, 'Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ²⁶And 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'? ²⁷He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.'*"
- ❖ So Jesus just flat out says, "You Sadducees are wrong. You're quite wrong." You don't know the Scriptures and you don't know the power of God. Which would've been dually offensive to the Sadducees because those were the two things they were known for. For understanding Torah and for wielding power in the Sanhedrin. But Jesus undercuts both claims.
- ❖ **His first point in v25 is that they underestimate the power of God.** Not just his power to resurrect the body, but his power to make all things new in the New Creation. **Resurrection life involves a transformation greater than they could imagine.** And not just the Sadducees but the Pharisees as well. Jesus is *not* just defending the Pharisee's position. No, he's challenging them too and that view of a general continuation from this life to the next.
 - **When it comes to marriage Jesus is saying that, in the New Creation after we rise from the dead, God's people will no longer be married nor be given in marriage.** Marriage is a covenantal union between a husband and wife where they become one flesh. But upon the death of either partner, the marriage covenant ceases and the surviving spouse is free to marry again (Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:39). That's why our marriage vows typically say, "Till death do us part."
 - **Resurrection life won't involve marriage.** Jesus says, for those who rise again unto eternal life in the New Creation, we will be like angels in heaven. Who are neither married nor given in marriage. Notice how Jesus includes the concept of angels in his response. Another reality these Sadducees get wrong.
- ❖ Now I know this might raise a host of questions for those of you who are married or who aspire to marriage, and I'll try to address some of them in our next point. But let's continue on in v26 to see how the Sadducees not only underestimate the power of God in resurrection, but they misunderstand the Word of God, even in the Torah.

- ❖ There are a number of OT texts, out of the Wisdom books or the Prophets, that Jesus could've quoted to defend the concept of resurrection (Job 19:25-27; Isa 26:19; Ezek 37:12; Dan 12:2; Hos 13:14). **But instead, he wisely quotes out of a book that the Sadducees unquestionably agree with and consider authoritative.** Jesus quotes **Exodus 3:6** where Moses is confronted by the LORD God who appears to him in a burning bush.
 - And Jesus reminds them of the exact words and verb tense that God used when introducing himself to Moses. *"God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?"*
 - **He didn't say, "I was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.** I *was* their God when they were in the land of the living, but now they have died and have been extinguished from existence." No, he didn't say that. He said, *"I am* their God." Which only makes sense if they still exist.
- ❖ Jesus is saying that the way God speaks of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as those who still exist—who are still alive (though without resurrected bodies)—that, for Jesus, is proof positive that there is an afterlife. **The patriarchs did die in body, but they are still alive in spirit, in the presence of God, awaiting a future resurrection.** Our Lord is *not* the God of the dead but of the living. That's Jesus's masterful response to the Sadducees.
- ❖ **Now before we move on to consider some implications, I think it's helpful to reiterate how Jesus crafted an entire theological argument on the basis on a single word in the Scriptures.** Everything hinged upon the fact that the Scriptures said "I am" instead of "I was." So it's safe to say that, from Jesus's point of view, the inspiration of Scripture applies to every single word. To even the particular tense of the verb "to be." **That means every word in Scripture, every verb tense, comes from God and is purposefully placed there.**
 - If any of you have been wrestling with questions about the trustworthiness of Scripture, I hope it helps to hear Jesus's perspective. I get it if you still doubt some parts of the Bible. **But if you know you can trust Jesus, then you can trust his perspective on Scripture.** His view that every word in the Bible—down to its tense—is trustworthy. Breathed out by inspiration of God (2 Tim 3:16).
 - That's Jesus's high view of Scripture. If we're his disciples—if we call him as our Rabbi, our Master—then how can we hold to any other position but his? You should trust Scripture because you trust Jesus.

The Resurrection and Its Implications

- ❖ So now that we've walked through this episode and talked about the Sadducees and their assumptions as well as Jesus and his response, let's conclude by considering some of the implications if the Sadducees are wrong and Jesus is right. If a glorious resurrection life is awaiting God's people—where we will be like the angels in heaven—if **that's true, then what does that mean for life now and the life to come?**

- ❖ **Let's think about the implications for marriage.** Let's tackle some of those questions that might be vexing you. When you heard Jesus say that when the dead are raised they neither marry nor are given in marriage—maybe that grieves you. Or maybe that relieves you! I don't know how you're responding. **But I do know it's easy for us to overly romanticize marriage.** Making it one of the highest—if not the ultimate—pursuit in life. There are so many books, poems, songs, and movies centered on this singular pursuit of a romantic partner, which typically results in marriage.
 - So I can understand why someone might be sad to hear Jesus speak of marriage as momentary. As temporary in nature. Isn't marriage supposed to be special? Isn't marriage a covenant? Yes, but it's *not* an *eternal* covenant. It's not the same as the New Covenant that all Christians share with Christ. **Our covenantal relationship with Christ is eternal. But our earthly marriages are merely signs pointing to that heavenly reality.** Marriage is like a picture depicting that relationship between Christ and his church (Eph 5:32). Eventually, one day when you're standing before the Christ face-to-face, you're going to set the picture aside.
- ❖ Just imagine a married soldier imprisoned in a POW camp, separated from his beloved wife for a span of many years. **Every night he falls asleep staring at a worn-out photo of her.** That photo is his most cherished possession. Amidst the horrors of the POW camp, it keeps him hopeful. The photo practically keeps him alive.
 - Now imagine the war is over. He survived the camp and now returns home to be reunited with his beloved. Imagine if he's in the car pulling up to the house, and standing in the driveway, waiting for him, is his beautiful wife. Wouldn't it be strange for him—instead of running to his wife to throw his arms around her—if he were to remain in the car just staring at that old photo? “What are you doing, man! Stop looking at her picture. She's right there in the flesh!”
 - **In the same way, when we finally see Jesus face-to-face, it's time to put the picture aside.** It would be just as strange for a husband and wife in the resurrection life to be staring at each other when Jesus is right over there, standing by his throne, with his arms open.
- ❖ Yes, our marriages should be treated as special. But they shouldn't be treated as everything. Because they're not eternal. When you said “till death do us part,” you and your spouse vowed to part. Just not until death. But that's when your union ends. **That's when you set aside the photo to enjoy the reality—to enjoy a relationship with Christ for all eternity.**
 - When marriage is placed in proper perspective—in Jesus's perspective—then you're in a much better position to honor your marriage without idolizing it. That's how Jesus's teaching on the resurrection affects our experience of marriage.
- ❖ **Now let's think about the implications for the afterlife.** According to Jesus, the afterlife is both more familiar and more glorious than you think. On one hand, many Christians have a view of the afterlife that's *too* different. Their picture of heaven is something otherworldly. They're thinking of castles in the sky. Disembodied souls floating in the clouds.

- ❖ Heaven can seem so different that it can actually be a bit scary. Because we're typically scared of the unfamiliar. But that's why the resurrection is so comforting. **We will rise—not with unfamiliar, generic bodies that have no relation to the ones we have now. No, we will rise like Jesus rose—with a body recognizable by his friends and family.** It was *his* body. But now a glorified, resurrected one.
 - And as a Christian, that's my blessed hope. That one day I'll die, and I'll be planted in a grave. **But on the Day of the Lord, I will rise in newness of life in my own resurrected body.** And while I won't be married anymore, I'll still recognize my believing wife in her resurrected body along with all my believing family and friends in their resurrected bodies. **And all us saints will still be living on *this* earth.** It'll be a new earth. Sanctified and purified of all traces of sin and its consequences. But it'll still be our earth. Jesus will make all things new. Not all new things.
- ❖ So the afterlife will be more familiar than you might think. **But, at the same time, it'll be more glorious than you can imagine.** In contrast to the Pharisees who saw the afterlife as a straight-line continuation of this life, Jesus reminds us *not* to underestimate the transforming power of God. **Just as we have no need to fear an afterlife that's too unfamiliar, we don't have to fear one that's too predictable and boring.**
 - There's no way any of us can predict or imagine what it'll be like when heaven comes down to earth. I'm pretty sure that everyday waking up in the New Creation—which assumes our resurrected bodies will still need to sleep (I could be wrong)—every new day will be a day filled with awe and wonder. **There will be so much newness in the New Creation to explore.** Especially since it means we'll have unfettered access to God in all his glory. **It'll take an eternity to exhaust all the newness.** Which means we never will. For those in Christ, the afterlife will be more glorious and more satisfying than you could ever ask or imagine.
- ❖ But I hope you heard that phrase I added. **I said that glorious afterlife is awaiting *those in Christ*.** In other words, this is only good news for those who trust in Christ. Otherwise, apart from Christ, you really ought to fear death. **Let's end by talking about the implications for the fear of death.** That commonality we all share that I mentioned in the beginning.
 - My point is that if the Sadducees are wrong—if the resurrection of the dead is true—then there will be a judgment awaiting us. We won't simply perish out of existence when we die. **We'll have to face the Lord and give an account for our lives.** We'll have to try our best to justify ourselves before a holy God. If that's what awaits us after death, then we're totally right to fear it.
- ❖ But this is why Jesus came to earth. Since we share in flesh and blood, he partook of the same. He embraced our humanity. He experienced our mortality. And gave his life as a ransom for many. So that we could be justified in him when we stand before our holy God.

- ❖ Those who are in Christ have no need to fear death. **Not because we deny a future judgment but because Jesus fulfilled it.** He removed death's sting by letting it sting him. But death couldn't hold him. Jesus rose victorious. **And now death, having used up its sting, is rendered harmless.** It still buzzes around but it can't hurt you. And eventually death itself will die on the day of resurrection.
 - This is the Christian's hope. And it's available to all who place their faith in Christ. To all who trust in God's Word and in his power to raise you from the dead.
- ❖ Friends, don't waste your time trying to control death. We can't deter it. We can't deny it. But we *can* trust the One who defeated it. **We can put our lives in the hands of the One who transformed death from a scary final destination into a mere door to a better world.** Into a departure for a better land. Into the beginning of Chapter One of the Great Story in which every chapter is better than the one before.