

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## HE IS NOT THE GOD OF THE DEAD

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### Matthew 22:23-32

The Sadducees were a political party of priestly and aristocratic tendency which became relatively influential in Israel at the time of Jesus. They had one particularity: they denied the idea of a life after death. The Sadducees accepted only the first five books of the OT as authoritative. For them, the Pentateuch was the supreme authority in matters of faith. And they maintained that since they could not find any explicit teaching on the resurrection in the Pentateuch, they did not believe in it.

In the passage that we are going to study today, the Sadducees asked Jesus a question about the resurrection in a kind of trick manner. If the resurrection were true, they argued, then impossible situations will necessarily arise, such as the one that they are about to describe. They knew that Jesus taught the resurrection. They were hoping to trap Him by exposing the weakness and absurdity of such a teaching. Let's read this passage. Matthew 22:23-32.

*Matthew 22:23. The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question,*

*24 saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies, having no children, his brother must marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.'*

*25 Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother.*

*26 So too the second and third, down to the seventh.*

*27 After them all, the woman died.*

*28 In the resurrection, therefore, to which of the seven will she be wife? For they all had her."*

*29 But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.*

*30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.*

*31 And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God,*

*32 '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."*

### Misunderstanding the resurrection

The Sadducees used a part of Moses' law, the levirate law, as the basis of their argument (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). This law said that when a husband died without a son, his brother was to marry his wife and bear a son. By law, the son was considered the first-born son of the deceased brother. The levirate law assured two things: (a) that the family name continued, and (b) that the property holdings were kept in the family. You can see that the law was given in order to help preserve and enlarge the nation of Israel.

The Sadducees then suggested a logical situation that could have arisen. There were seven brothers. The first brother married, but he died before having a child. Each of the other brothers obeyed the law, but each died before bearing a child. Finally, the woman died also. The Sadducees' question, 'Whose wife shall she be in eternity?' showed, in their mind, the absurdity of the resurrection. Such a situation would cause a great embarrassment in the heavenly court, they thought, with seven men arguing over which one has the right to have the woman as his wife now that they all had at some stage or other been married to her.

Jesus said to them, 'You obviously don't know the state of affairs in heaven. In heaven, nobody gets married to anyone. Death terminates a marriage. There is no more marriage after death. Therefore this question simply doesn't arise.'

Jesus also said, 'You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.' 'You don't know the Scriptures. And you don't know God's power.' This is a startling statement because the Sadducees certainly considered themselves as knowing the Scriptures very well. When Jesus says, 'You don't know the Scriptures,' He does not have in mind 'how long they have been studying the Bible,' or 'where and with whom they studied.' You can spend a very long time studying the Bible with the best teachers, and still not know the Scriptures.' Jesus was speaking about understanding the spirit of God's word. Of course the Sadducees did know the Scriptures in a superficial sense, but they had not penetrated through to their real meaning, to the spirit of what is being said in the Scriptures.

If you really know the Scriptures, you will experience the power of God. These two, the Scriptures and the power of God, are inseparable. They are bound together. Knowing God's power has to do with a living relationship to God. When you have a communion with God in your daily life, you will know His power. And the closer is your walk with God, the better you will know the Scriptures.

Take for example the resurrection. How do you understand the resurrection? What does it mean? You can explain it from the point of view of history, or linguistics, or even of theology. You may feel that you have a good grasp of it. That does not mean that you have entered into the spirit of it. If you have not done that, from Jesus' point of view, you still don't know it. But when God's power comes into your life and raises you up, then you begin to know something about the resurrection because now you have experienced it. When God takes you, a spiritually dead person and raises you up to spiritual life, and transforms you into a new creature, then you understand what resurrection is about. You have experienced resurrection. You have experienced what it is to become a new person by God's power. You can say that you have penetrated through to the meaning of the resurrection. You see how knowing the Scriptures and knowing the power of God are interrelated.

## **The scriptural ground for the resurrection**

Jesus' answer to the Sadducees was two-fold. First He took the specific issue they have raised and explained how they have misunderstood the resurrection by assuming that it must be analogous to the present life. In the resurrection life, marriage does not exist.

Then secondly, He turned to the basic issue underlying their question, i.e. whether there are scriptural grounds for believing in resurrection at all. Let's now concentrate on this part of Jesus' answer.

In v. 32, the Lord Jesus said to the Sadducees that in the very book of authority to them, in the Pentateuch, God made this statement, *I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*. In the previous verse, v. 31, we read, *But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was **spoken to you** by God.* 'Spoken to you by God.' These words were originally given to Moses (Exodus 3:6). But they remain true for every person. Jesus was in fact saying, 'These

words were addressed as much to you as to Moses. Remember, in the burning bush, God appeared to Moses and said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' There is the resurrection, in those very words. That is the proof that the resurrection is real.'

This is quite a puzzling statement. We read it again and again. We try to follow Jesus' argument. But honestly, we just don't get it. How does that prove the resurrection? He simply said, 'I am the God of Abraham. I am the God of Isaac. I am the God of Jacob.' Where is the resurrection in that sentence? We look at it back and forth, and we simply don't see anything that supports the idea of the resurrection. Do you see it?

When I look at the commentaries on this passage, I find the traditional explanation not very convincing.

In the traditional explanation, the stress is on the words 'I am.' God said, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Not 'I was.' At the time when God said those words, the three patriarchs had been dead for hundreds of years. The present tense of the sentence shows that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still alive. Because if they were dead, God would have said, 'I was the God of Abraham.' Instead, He said 'I am.' And if they are still in existence, it implies that they must have resurrected at some point.

This is the explanation that you will find in many commentaries. And as I said, in my opinion, it is not really satisfactory. Let me give you two reasons. The first one is that in Hebrew, no verb is expressed. It does not have the verb 'am'. The sentence is, 'I, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.' An argument that depends of the tense of the verb must depend on the Septuagint which has 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' We must remember, however, that the Septuagint is a translation from Hebrew to Greek. And an exegesis that is based on a translation rather than on the original Hebrew is poor exegesis.

Secondly, the logic of the reasoning is rather weak. To say that the statement 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' proves that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are alive is not based on good logic. 'I am the God of Abraham' would be a perfectly intelligible way for God to identify Himself as the God whom Abraham worshipped long time ago, even though Abraham is now dead.

Take this example. I could say, 'I am the father of X, Y and Z.' The sentence would not be wrong even if X, Y and Z are not alive anymore. I am still their father. I don't have to say, 'I was their father.' Why should I? Have I stopped being their father in the meantime? No. When I say, 'I am the father of X, Y, Z,' it shows that I am alive. But it does necessarily imply that my children are alive. So the argument that God's words in the present tense, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' proves that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still alive is not based on proper reasoning.

## **Why believe in God?**

If we cannot construct our argument on the tense of the verse, then where is the proof of the resurrection to be seen?

Let's approach the problem in a different way. Suppose we simply read the statement, 'I was the God of Abraham. I was the God of Isaac. And I was the God of Jacob.' The sentence would then mean, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when they were alive. At the time when they lived, I am the God that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob once knew.'

Some tough questions can arise from that kind of statement. Take this one: You can ask God, 'You are saying that you are the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and they are now all dead and buried. If that is the case, then what good did it do Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to have you as God?' In other words, if believing in God ends up in death anyway, what difference does it make to know God?

If there is no essential difference, if the godly perish as the ungodly do, then we must conclude that there is no point in believing in God.

Would it mean that believing in God simply makes life a bit easier? This has never been an argument in the Bible, that a believer has an easier life than a non-believer. We need only to read the Psalms to see that the righteous do not have it any easier in this life than the unrighteous. In fact, too often, the unrighteous seem to have a better existence. They seem to get away with many things, while the righteous suffer. What advantage then is there in believing in God?

When God said to Moses, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,' what exactly did He have in mind? It seems that He was simply saying, 'I am the God of several dead men.' Or we can say that He was the God of several righteous men, but they are all dead and buried anyway. That brings us to the conclusion that in the end whether you believe in God or not makes no difference.

### **The importance of the resurrection of Christ**

In v. 32, we have this other sentence. *He is not the God of the dead but of the living.* This phrase is very important in understanding Jesus' thinking. You see, Jesus was saying to the Sadducees, 'Concerning the resurrection, you know that God proclaimed to Moses in the Pentateuch, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' It means this. Either Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive, or they are dead. There are only 2 possibilities. According to you Sadducees, they are dead. And if they are dead, it implies that God proclaimed Himself to be the God of the dead. 'I am the God of dead Abraham. I am the God of dead Isaac. I am the God of dead Jacob.'

'If you think that by telling Me that in heaven there will be an embarrassing situation, well, let me tell you this. Your position is a lot worse. Because you believe in a God of the dead. And if really God is the God of dead people, there are only two possible explanations. Either He is unwilling to raise them up, or he is unable to raise them up. Each of these possibilities leaves you in a hopeless position. Because if God is unwilling to raise up Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then He is not a God of love. Neither is He a God of justice.

What kind of God is this if, having entered into a covenant relationship with the ones that He loves, He leaves them six feet under after they die? You call that love? And He is also not a God of justice. Because it would be totally unjust that the godly and the ungodly receive exactly the same end. What is the point of aiming to be godly if the ungodly are not held accountable for their actions? A God who treats the godly and ungodly alike is neither a God of love nor a God of justice.

Now, what does the Bible say? Exactly the opposite. The Bible tells us that God is love and that He is just. Therefore, if you know the Scriptures, you have to rule out that possibility, that God is unwilling to raise up Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That leaves us with only one other alternative, that He is unable to raise up Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is very willing, but He does not have the power to do it.

If you knew God's power, you would not say that He is unable. Because to say that God is unable to raise the dead is to say that death is more powerful than God. And that is not what the Scriptures tell us.

You can see why the resurrection of Christ is so important. It is to show that God is both just and merciful, and also that He is powerful. That He is willing to raise the dead and He is able to raise the dead.

## He is the God of the living

Now we begin to see the basis of Jesus' argument. He explains that God's proclamation to Moses implied that either God is the God of the dead, or He is the God of the living. Jesus concludes His statement by saying this. 'He is not the God of the dead. He is the God of the living.' In these words, the Lord Jesus gives the key of his reasoning about the resurrection.

There you can see the resurrection. Do you see the beauty of the argument? The argument is based on the nature of God's relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: God relates to the living and not to the dead. If, when Abraham died, there had been an end of him, there would have been an end also of God's relation to him as God. But God speaks of Himself as the God of Abraham. In other words, God is the God of covenant and of promise. When Jesus makes the point that God is the God of the living, not the dead, He implied the existence of the resurrection. Because if the patriarchs are dead, then the God of promise cannot be their God. The point is that the patriarchs are not dead, and neither are God's promises to them. For the promises to the patriarchs to come to pass and for God to still be their God, resurrection must be a reality.

You see, there are only two ways in which you can take this passage of the OT. Either He is the God of the dead, or He is the God of the living. You have to make a choice. And depending on your belief, you will take one or the other. The Sadducees believed in a God who was a God of the dead since they believed Abraham and the others to be dead. But the Lord Jesus points out that if that is the case, their faith in God is pointless. Paul uses precisely this argument in 1Corinthians 15. If there is no resurrection, if death is final, Paul said, then our faith is worthless (v. 17) and we are of all people most to be pitied (v. 19). Why did we endure all this for? Why did we turn our back upon the world? For nothing! Because it all ends in death. Therefore let us rather go out and eat, Paul says, quoting the OT (v. 32). Let us drink and be merry. Let us enjoy ourselves in the world in sin as much as possible. At least, we will die happy.

But if God is the God of the living, then the situation is totally different. Because one day, we must face Him. The Scriptures say that God will raise up not only the believers, but also the unbelievers, to face the judgment. We read in John 5:28-29, '*...for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth-- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.*' Every man dies. And every man will be raised up to face the judgment of God. No escape will be possible.

That is the point that the parallel passage in Luke makes. In Luke 20:38, we read, *Now He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to Him.* 'For all live to Him.' What does that mean? It means that everyone lives by God's power and lives answerable to Him. Everyone lives to Him. This statement summarizes the fact that all the issues of life are in God's hands. You will live or die not because death is too powerful for God to handle. Life and death are in God's hands. He is the one who determines who lives and who dies. All live accountable to Him.

Resurrection is a reality that should affect how we see this world and how we live in it. Because in the afterlife, all will answer to God, and only some will be found worthy.