

I suppose the most obvious question about this gospel passage is this: “what the heck is going on here?!!”

The first part of the answer has to do with the “Levirate marriage” described by the Sadducees. which was a culturally circumscribed 1st Century institution because it both ensured that the family line continued, and – in a male-dominated society – also offered some protection to women. As such this form of marriage was a crucial element in maintaining community stability. In 1st Century Mediterranean culture you never went outside the extended family, never considered marrying an outsider. Of course, the feelings and wishes of the women were irrelevant, which is one of the things that jumps out and bites us! We should remember that, but set it to one side, if we want to understand what’s going on here.

Same with children. In this culture children had no intrinsic value. Rather they only became important once they grew up. Once grown they were extra hands for all the work necessary to survive, and they’d look after you in your old age – they were, in essence, a family’s own welfare system. In such a tight-knit setting children – from within the family – were a blessing whose value was understood in terms of potential, with no intrinsic worth. But the flip side – if the children were the result of marriage with an outsider – even removed that value and potential. Those children were, simply put, a curse.

The second part of the answer (of “what the heck is going on here?”) has to do with who was asking the question of Jesus: the Sadducees. They were the other major theological party in 1st Century Judaism to the Pharisees. Perhaps the easiest way to describe the Sadducees is to say that they are the opposite of the Pharisees. If a Pharisee said “White,” the Sadducee would be almost certain to argue, “Black.” The Sadducees appear to have been the more culturally sophisticated than the Pharisees who were, remember, the party of the people. The Sadducees tended to come from among the Jewish elites, the leading priestly families and the aristocracy. Their approach to scripture was quite a bit narrower and more conservative than that of the Pharisees.

Their question is predicated on Jesus’ identity: he was was one of the most prominent and unshakable Rabbis of his time AND many of his theological positions were Pharisaic, making him an obvious target for Sadducees.

And one of the most obvious theological positions of the Pharisaic movement – and of Jesus – was the idea of resurrection from the dead.

There are some obvious reasons why this was so. Resurrection was a way of putting flesh on hope in days when justice in this world seemed irretrievable, and it was a particularly powerful belief when coupled with the other side of the theological coin, that those who perpetrated injustice must be brought to account. Israel’s hope and faith in God as liberator only made this view more powerful.

But not to the Sadducees. They rejected such a view as pure speculation. But they went further; they were prepared to ridicule those who held such views.

This last reality explains why the Sadducees asked this particular question about the one bride and the seven brothers. What's especially important is for us to notice is that it wasn't asked as part of a search for the truth. **The Sadducees didn't expect, indeed, didn't want, an answer.** In the highly charged theological-political climate **they wanted to score points, wanted to stump Jesus, and thus to demonstrate how "foolish" ideas of a resurrection from the dead were.** If Jesus, the most noted and un-stumpable teacher alive, could be stumped by their question, then he – and the Pharisees – would become (reluctantly) an endorsement for their view.

So the purpose of the Sadducees question wasn't not to "get Jesus into trouble," but to further their own dogma.

I'd be willing to bet that this wasn't the first time the Sadducees trotted out questions designed to expose the absurdity of the idea of resurrection. They don't care about the woman (as usual!), they only care about creating the intellectual quicksand into which Jesus and the Pharisees entered with such crazy ideas.

Jesus replies. And the pithy, sharp character of that reply – so like Jesus' responses elsewhere – adds historical authenticity to this whole story. Jesus simply said: "God is not god of the dead but of the living". Firstly, it was enigmatic, it was no answer at all, if you think the dead remain dead. At another level, though, **Jesus was saying that to claim God is god of the living must include the claim that God's care extends to those who have died in a way that they cannot really be dismissed as dead. Jesus is operating with a theology of God which says: even in death God is with us and therefore we must be with God and so our existence continues, even if in some mysterious way.**

In case there's now any confusion let me underscore this important point: the main focus of the passage is God. **God is the certain detail which hope has.** The rest you could legitimately describe as speculation or the brush stroke of imagination. Ultimately it is faith in a God who loves which forces the issue, despite the intellectual difficulties which are no less today than then. **Somehow God continues to care so that there is also no end to being the focus of that care.**

Within the theological debate there was, on the table, a second central Sadduceean belief that Jesus challenged, that had to do with the future. Jesus said, "In the age to come....." The entire argument of the Sadducees was predicated on a single premise that life in the kingdom of God things will be just like it is now. That's why the Sadducees found their question so compelling, because they assumed that the institution of marriage would continue unchanged into the kingdom. Thus, a woman who was married to seven brothers would be in a terrible predicament in heaven, for she would have to choose one of them to live with.

We tend to do that, too, don't we?!!

Jesus simply said, "things change, ESPECIALLY when it has anything to do with God! Don't, therefore, expect the status quo to continue". That's a challenge to and for all of us: don't expect that the comfortable way that we understand the world will continue! Expect, instead, that things

will be different.

Different but still cast in the same central context, that even in death **somehow God continues to care so that, for us, there is also no end to being the focus of that care. God is the certain detail which hope has**, and thus, with Paul, we can embrace that belief he continually proclaims: we do not hope in vain. May we continue to live in that hope.