

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew
 SERMON: **What Will Family Relationships Be Like in Heaven?**
 SCRIPTURE: Matthew 22:23-33
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
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Nearly everyone believes in heaven, but when asked what heaven is like, words like mansions, streets of gold, and gates of pearl are about as far as most people can go. The Bible certainly teaches the existence of heaven, and there is actually a fair amount of descriptive language in Revelation 21 and 22. What we don't know is how much of that language is literal and how much symbolic; for it is possible that human language is simply incapable of describing heaven.

Besides, the topography of heaven is not nearly as important to most of us as the question of family relationships, and that is what I will focus our attention on this morning.

Will I be reunited with my mother or father?
 How about my spouse, or child, or sibling who has died?
 Will we be family again?
 Will our family relationships be the same?

This was brought home to me after my father died nearly two years ago. He and my mother were married for 67 years and always deeply in love. My mom has been very lonely since then and constantly talks about how much she looks forward to being with my dad again. Is that a realistic hope? At funerals we often console people by telling them, "You'll see your loved one again and pick up where you left off." But is that true?

There is a very troubling passage in Matthew that we need to wrestle with this morning regarding what family relationships will be like in heaven. It is not a teaching passage, in the sense that Jesus didn't set out to offer a discourse on these matters. Rather it is what I would call "a teachable-moment passage" where Jesus addresses an issue because His enemies are trying to trip Him up. Nevertheless, what Jesus says is the Word of God and we need to listen.

In our study of Matthew these past several months we've encountered constant conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus. Their hatred of Him and their determination to do away with Him has increased at every encounter, and they are now actively plotting to put Him to death in the middle of Passion Week. But there is another group of religious leaders we haven't talked about as much, namely the Sadducees. While the Pharisees and others have thrown their best punches at Jesus and have taken an intellectual beating for it, the Sadducees have been in the background, probably enjoying the defeat their rivals have endured. But on Palm Sunday the Sadducees themselves are drawn into the middle of the fray.

Who are the Sadducees?

While the Pharisees are legalistic conservatives, very religious, and suspicious of government, the Sadducees tend to be theologically liberal, very political, and collaborators with the occupation government of Rome. They are by far the most wealthy and influential of the Jewish sects. They have obtained their wealth because they control the temple and the priesthood, along

with the concessions of money changing and selling of sacrificial animals.

Until Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the Sadducees had shown little interest in Him, but when He drove them out of the temple, it affected their bottom line and turned their fury against Jesus. No doubt His claim to be the Son of David is a factor well. Any claim to kingship might evoke a harsh reaction from Rome, which would in turn threaten the privileged position of the Sadducees under Rome.

However, they think they have an ace in the hole. Being the intelligentsia of the Jewish religious elite, they believe *they* have a question that will stump Him and make a fool of Him. It is, of course, a question that would probably stump any of us, but then . . . we're not Jesus. Let's read from Matthew 22:22-33:

That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. "Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?"

Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."

When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

The Sadducees believe in the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures but give unique emphasis to the writings of Moses, whom they view as the supreme Law Giver. And since Moses taught nothing directly about the resurrection, the Sadducees deny its reality. In fact, in Acts 23:8 we read, "The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all."¹ Well, it is the doctrine of the resurrection that comes to the fore in our text today, Matthew 22.

The Sadducees offer a riddle to Jesus in order to make Him look the fool. (23-28)

"Teacher, Moses said, . . ." they begin. Once again we see condescending flattery by the use of the term "Rabbi." This choice of title is especially deceitful because it is as a Teacher that they intend to embarrass Him. They make it clear that they are quoting Moses, the supreme spokesman for God, for if Jesus contradicts Moses, they hope He will lose all credibility with the Jewish crowds.

On the surface the Sadducees' alleged account of the seven brothers sounds utterly ludicrous. But there is at least some rationale behind it. You see, there was a provision in the law of Moses called Levirate marriage (from the Hebrew word *levir*, meaning brother-in-law). The law seems

very strange to us but was apparently established in order that tribal names, families and inheritances might be kept intact. It is found in Deuteronomy 25:5-6:

“If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.”

This law was probably not being observed in the time of Jesus, and even if it were, it is highly unlikely that a case so bizarre as this would ever have occurred. The last few brothers would have to have been a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic to agree to marry *this* woman considering *her* track record. But the custom of Levirate marriage was well known and acknowledged to be a divine provision.

But the most devious thing about the story is the question they ask in verse 28: “Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?” Remember now, these Sadducees don’t even believe in resurrection. But since Jesus does, they think their riddle is the perfect vehicle to show the absurdity of the whole notion of resurrection all the while making a fool of Jesus.

Jesus identifies the principal error of the Sadducees (and of all unbelievers). (29)

Jesus doesn’t immediately respond to their question but rather makes an astute observation: “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” Friends, isn’t that the basic problem with all unbelief? People do not know the Scriptures. They haven’t paid attention to the wonderful treasure we have in the Bible in that it deals with virtually every essential question facing us in this life or the next. Nor have they come to grips with the fact that there is supernatural power behind the Word.

What the Bible tells us sometimes seems unlikely or even impossible, but it’s not, because an almighty, omnipotent God stands behind His Word. We must never interpret Scripture in such a way that it limits God’s power to meet our needs or to create order out of chaos. That is what the Sadducees are doing.

But then Jesus goes on to respond to their riddle by confirming His belief in the resurrection while challenging their logic.

Jesus confounds the Sadducees by challenging their logic. (30)

“At the resurrection,” He says, making it clear that He certainly accepts the resurrection as a given, “people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.” What He is doing here is dispelling the notion that earthly categories apply to life in heaven. He tells them that family relationships in heaven will be different, because we will be different. Here on earth people marry and establish exclusive relationships, because one of the main purposes of marriage is the procreation of the race. That won’t be necessary in heaven

because no one will die there. When Jesus says we will be like the angels (and by the way, He says we will be “*like* angels,” not that we will *be* angels), I think He has in mind these two aspects of angelic existence—(1) they don’t marry and have little angels, and (2) they don’t die.

Now here is Jesus’ point:

The premise of the Sadducees’ argument, namely that the woman must be *someone’s* wife in heaven, is false, and therefore, no conclusion can be drawn from it. False premises do not permit any conclusion. If there is no marriage in heaven, the problem they pose disappears and the resurrection remains unassailed.

Now, while Jesus’ answer succeeds in astonishing the crowds (verse 33), it may also leave us surprised and a little confused. His words should certainly be very shocking and distressing to those of the Mormon faith, for the primary reason they have built incredibly beautiful and costly temples in approximately 128 cities around the world (plus 17 under construction or being planned) is to perform celestial marriages, that is to seal people to their spouses for eternity. But setting aside the Mormon struggle with this text, let me speak to our own struggle with it.

But if there is no marriage in heaven, what will happen to the family relationships we enjoy here? Of course, it is not strictly accurate to say that there will be no marriage in heaven, for in fact there will be one unbelievable marriage—between Christ and His bride—and all believers will be part of that marriage. Randy Alcorn, who wrote perhaps the best book ever on heaven, observes astutely, “The one-flesh union we enjoy on earth is a signpost pointing to our relationship with Christ as our bridegroom. Once we reach the destination, the signpost becomes unnecessary. That one marriage—our marriage to Christ—will be so completely satisfying that even the most wonderful earthly marriage wouldn’t be as fulfilling.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But in order to explore this issue of what family relationships will be like in heaven I’m going to ask and try to answer several questions that may be on your mind:

1. Will we know one another in heaven? The simplest answer I can give to this questions is this: How could we possibly know any less in heaven than we know now? Of course we will know one another, and we will know one another better than we ever knew one another here on earth.

The biggest problem with our relationships here on earth is that we aren’t transparent with one another and don’t understand one another. We lack the communication ability to let our spouses know what is really on our hearts. Or we lack the discernment to understand what they are trying to tell us. In heaven those hindrances won’t be there. There will be nothing to hide, no sin to interfere, no need to guess what makes someone else tick. Isn’t that what 1 Cor. 13:12 is saying to us? “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror (a first-century mirror); then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

2. Will we still have best friends and relatives? I want to propose this principle: we

will not enjoy less friendship and intimacy in heaven but more. When you read about heaven in Scriptures, it always portrays the joys of earth but to an even greater degree. When it speaks of a river of water, the water is no longer muddy or polluted but crystal clear. When it speaks of the productivity of the trees, they are yielding not one or two crops a year but twelve—one crop every month. When it speaks of light, it is no longer the light of a lamp or even the light of the sun but the light that emanates from the glory of God Himself.

If the best things of earth will be enhanced and made even better in heaven, would this principle not also apply to friendships and family? While Jesus says that the institution of human marriage will end, He never even hints that deep relationships between married people would end. Our family will always be our family, but we will also be part of one big happy family. While marriage is an exclusive relationship here, we won't need exclusive relationships in heaven, because everyone will be perfectly and intimately related to everyone else.

When you stop and think about it, this change almost seems necessary in order for heaven to be heaven for everyone. Some of us have deeply satisfying marriages and our spouses are devout believers in Christ. But what about those believers whose spouse is not a Christian? Or what about those who deeply desired to marry but were never able to? What about those who wanted to have children but were never able to? There is a hole in their hearts that is never completely filled here on earth. Are they condemned to be single and childless for eternity, while the rest of us enjoy marriage for eternity? No. God will give everyone relationships that will meet those heart-felt needs completely. If you never had a parent you could trust, you'll find trustworthy parents everywhere in heaven. If you never had a child, those longings too will be fulfilled. If you never had a spouse, likewise. There will be no advantage for those who had wonderful families over those who missed out here on earth.

In heaven there will be no need to be entirely focused on the people who have been our families here. Will we know them? Yes, certainly. Will we love them and be able to spend time with them? I don't doubt it. But will we be pairing off to live as little family units in our own personal mansions in isolation from others? No, it doesn't appear so.

So what I am telling you is that Jesus is not saying that we will not be reunited with our family members who have gone to heaven before us. Rather He is saying that the nature of the relationship will be different. It will not be less than it is now—just different and better.

3. What effect will *new* relationships have on us? Imagine attending a special party in heaven, a party that includes the members of your family who were believers and your dearest Christian friends, but on top of all that it includes some amazing people you have known about but have never met—some living, some long gone. I'm thinking of a guest list that might include Charles Stanley, Chuck Colson, Billy Graham, Francis Schaeffer, C. S. Lewis, A. W. Tozer, Billy Sunday, Hudson Taylor, Charles Spurgeon, Dwight Moody, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jonathan Edwards, most of the original pilgrims who came to these shores in 1620, Martin Luther, John Calvin, St. Augustine, the Apostles Peter and Paul, Mary and Martha, Nehemiah, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Obednego, Elijah and Elisha, David and Solomon, Moses,

Joseph, Abraham, Noah, and even all the way back to Adam and Eve.

Just imagine the excitement in not only meeting all these people, but in getting to spend as much time as you want with them. Imagine being able to have a conversation with Shadrach and asking him what it must have been like to be picked up, bound, and thrown into a fiery furnace. Imagine being able to talk to Joseph about that incredible meeting he had with his brothers when he was Prime Minister of Egypt. I'd like to ask Adam how he knew what to call all the animals. Now mind you, there are millions of people at this party. And there is an infinite amount of time to get acquainted.

Here is my point. If there are hundreds of our family and personal acquaintances at this party, plus thousands of people we know of but have never met, plus millions more that we didn't even know about but are ready to meet us; do you think we will feel deprived in view of such a plethora of relationships if we don't get to spend half our waking hours each day with our immediate family?

What I don't want to convey, however, is that there can't be any special relationships in heaven. Jesus was closer to John than to any of the other disciples. He was closer to Peter, James and John than to the rest of the Twelve. He was closer to Mary and Martha and Lazarus than any other family. Since Jesus was closer to some than to others, clearly there can't be anything wrong with that. I'm sure that in heaven there won't be cliques, exclusiveness, posturing, or jealousy. But I suspect we will be closer to our own family than we are to others.

4. What effect will new places have on us? Let me expand your imagination even further. Think about all the places you would like to visit during your lifetime but probably won't be able to. Make up your own Bucket List—places you'd like to see before you kick the bucket. I've been in 30 countries on five continents, but I haven't (and may never in this life), have the chance to dive on the Great Barrier Reef, climb Machu Pichu, sail on the fjords in Norway, travel through the Panama Canal, visit the Great Wall of China, or see Denali National Park in Alaska. But I suspect all that stuff will be listed on the travel brochures in heaven, and we'll be able to go first-class. Furthermore, imagine the sites no one has seen on Jupiter and in other galaxies. And again there is an infinite amount of time to see all these things.

Once again my point is that if there are hundreds of places we haven't yet visited and millions more we don't even know about that are ready for us to visit, then how much time do you think we will want to spend in the mansion being prepared for us or moping if don't get to spend all our time alone with our spouse in heaven?

And I've just barely mentioned the single greatest attraction in heaven—the throne room where the Father sits with Jesus on his right hand! Which brings up this question:

5. What will be the impact of the central focus of heaven have, which is the Lord Jesus Christ? The illustration I am about to use would be a lot more effective if President Bush were more popular today than he is, but I'm going to go ahead and use it anyway. Besides, I still respect him. I told parts of this story once before, but bear with me again. Four months after 911

I was called one day at my church office in St. Louis by someone who said he was from the White House and wanted to know if I would attend a meeting of clergy the next Monday with President Bush. I was being invited because I pastored one of the key churches in St. Louis. At first I thought it was a prank, but it sure sounded official.

To make a long story short I arrived downtown early and found myself in a room with just 18 chairs around a large table. Each place had a large name holder facing the center, and as I looked around the room at first I couldn't spot my name and wondered if there had been a mistake. Then I saw my name, just four feet from President Bush's name and with only the Archbishop of St. Louis between us. Karl Rove's name was on the other side of me and 16 other clergy completed the gathering.

I called my wife on my cell phone, and you can imagine what I said: "Honey, I wish I was home with you!" Are you kidding me? That's no reflection on my wife at all, or on the status of our relationship, but I was totally consumed with the thrill of what I was about to experience. When President Bush walked in the room and shook hands with each of us, I could hardly believe it. He talked with us for an hour and allowed each of us to ask him questions. Imagine sitting with the most powerful man on earth for an hour, dialoguing with him! I had to pinch myself.

Now here's my point. In heaven there will be Someone so much greater and more exciting than the President of the United States that there is no comparison. We will be so blown away by His presence, so enthralled with His beauty, so eager to hear His words that everything and everyone else will pale into insignificance. We will be eager to talk to our spouses, but the conversation will be all about Him.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now I have wandered quite a ways from our text this morning. I want to return to it to see that Jesus does one more thing to the Sadducees. He has already confounded them by challenging their logic.

Jesus confounds the Sadducees by challenging their theology. (31-32)

The root theological issue at stake here is the doctrine of the resurrection. Jesus has affirmed that there will be one in verse 30 as He says, "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage," but then He provides Scriptural support for the doctrine of the resurrection. Notice how He introduces the topic in verse 31: "But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you . . .?" And He quotes Moses from Exodus 3:6. It's particularly important that He quotes Moses because, as you will recall, the Sadducees hold Moses in very high esteem.

The quotation is from the account of the burning bush, where God says to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Jesus' argument seems to hinge on the fact that God did not say, "I *was* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," but "I *am* . . ." If Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were dead and gone for good, then God should have said, "I *was* their God." But though they died, they yet live, and so God said, "I *am* their God."

Resurrection is a reality, claims Jesus, for God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. Luke's account adds an important point: "But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'"

Conclusion: Verse 33 says, "When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching." You know something? There are two ways to be astonished—in anger or in faith. If you're a K-State fan you can be astonished at K.U.'s or M.U.'s football team but still hate them. You might be astonished at a politician's skill but still work against him.

Or you can be astonished in faith. You can bow the knee. Which will it be for you today? None of us can help but be amazed at the wisdom of Jesus, but unless we allow that amazement to turn into trust and reliance, we have missed the greatest possible purpose for which He came.

My main goal this morning, as always, was to honestly explain the Scriptures, but also to give us hope and confidence that heaven is a place where we will enjoy family life like never before. But that will only be possible if our families are united in faith. If you have a family member you're not sure of, why not take the risk and share the Gospel with them—the fact that Jesus died for them, paid the penalty for their sin, and offers them the free gift of salvation.

Or it's possible that your family will be there without you! Have you received Christ as your personal Savior?

i. In Acts 23 there is a fascinating passage that gives us some important insight into the relationship between the Pharisees and Sadducees. The incident occurs some years after the death and resurrection of Christ as Apostle Paul is called to testify before the Jewish Sanhedrin. I begin the reading in verse 1:

Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"

Those who were standing near Paul said, "You dare to insult God's high priest?" Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'"

Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits,

but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.)

There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Imagine the Pharisees defending Paul! Once again it's the old issue of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The key point, however, is that the Sadducees totally reject the doctrine of the resurrection.

ii. Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, 336.

iii. After preaching this sermon, Dr. David Netherton, one of my valued parishioners, wrote the following note to me:

Thanks for bringing to life the Scriptures yesterday!! I was reminded of a post that our son Michael has on his Facebook site from a blog by Tim Challies (this is the link to the blog: [_____](#))

Rick Warren presents the benefits of being reconciled to God primarily in terms of personal benefit. "Wrapped up in Jesus are all the benefits and blessings mentioned in this book—and so much more! In Jesus, your past is forgiven, you get a purpose for living, and you get a home in heaven." All of these things are amazing, but they pale in comparison to Christ himself. John Piper says it well. The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?"