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Luke 20: 27-38

I don't know if you've noticed or not, but heaven is all the rage these days. Two books about heaven are on the New York Times Bestseller List. Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife, has been on the list for 53 weeks. And Heaven is for Real has been on it for 154 weeks.

Both books chronicle a person's near death experience and their subsequent journey to heaven. In the first book, the author -- a neurosurgeon -- was in a coma for seven days, which was the result of a rare brain illness.

While his body lay in a coma, Dr. Alexander says he journeyed beyond this world and encountered an angelic being who guided him into the deepest realms of super-physical existence. There he met, and spoke with, what he refers to as the "Divine source of the universe itself."

Heaven Is for Real documents the story of a four-year old boy who, during emergency surgery, slips from consciousness and enters heaven. He survives and begins talking about being able to look down and see the doctor operating and his dad praying in the waiting room. The family didn't know what to believe but soon the evidence was clear because . . .

The boy said he met his miscarried sister, whom no one had told him about, and his great grandfather who died 30 years before he was born, and then shared impossible-to-know details about each. He describes the horse that only Jesus could ride, about how "reaally big" God and his chair are, and how the Holy Spirit "shoots down power" from heaven to help us.

There are more than 5500 reviews for each book on Amazon.com, most of which are positive. But there are some reviews that are skeptical of the authors' tales. They don't buy the image of heaven the authors' claim to have experienced.

Maybe you don't buy it, either. A big chair for God? A horse only Jesus can ride? A power shooting Holy Spirit? Nah, you think. It sounds too far-fetched for me.

And maybe it is. But the fact that these two books are on the NYT bestseller list, and have been for over a year, or three, means there are a lot of people who are very fascinated with what happens to us after we die. And I don't think those book buyers are alone. All of us have questions about what happens after we die. Will I see my loved one? Will I see my dog? Do I keep this body, or will I get a new and improved one?

When the Sadducees question Jesus about the resurrection, they want to know "What's going to happen to the woman who had 7 husbands? Whose wife will she be in heaven?"

It's a fair question, and it's probably a question that some people want an answer to. I'm guessing that if you have a former spouse in your life, you want that spouse to stay former and not be your spouse for all of eternity.

So it's a fair question. But it's not an honest question. Because the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection. The Sadducees were one of several sects within Judaism that were around during Jesus' time. Sort of like there are several different branches of Christianity today, there were several different branches of Judaism back then. The Sadducees tended to be wealthy, from the aristocracy, and served as guardians of the temple. But they basically went out of business around 70 AD when the temple was destroyed. The Sadducees had big disagreements with the Pharisees, too, because they only believed the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible, were authoritative. Everything else in the Hebrew Scriptures was just rubbish.

But religion, like politics, can make for some strange bedfellows. So, because they didn't like Jesus any more than the Pharisees did, the Sadducees wanted to catch Jesus saying the wrong thing.

You see, when they come to Jesus with their question about the bride and 7 brothers, they aren't asking it because they know someone who just died and they're wondering if they will see that person in the afterlife. They aren't asking it because they want some clarity about what heaven will look like. In fact, they aren't asking their question with an open mind at all. They're fixed in their position about the resurrection—they don't believe in it. So why would they care what happens to some hypothetical wife?

They only care because they want to trip up Jesus. They want to snag him in a "gotcha" sort of argument. They want to catch him saying the wrong thing so they can use his words against him at his trial – which is only about 4 days away at this point in Luke's Gospel.

Now, anyone who has been a target of questions asked by people who have no intention of being influenced by the answers knows what a frustrating thing that can be, because you find yourself in a no-win situation. It doesn't matter what you have to say, because the person asking the question has already made up his or her mind as to what the answer is.

Author David James Duncan calls this philosophy "answerizing", which grows out of the idea that there is only one correct answer to every question. The Sadducees are experts in answerizing. There is only one correct answer to their question, and they have it.

But the Sadducees aren't the only ones with the answer. Both political parties claim to have the answer. As the mother of 4 children I always find it humorous when I meet people who don't have children but seem to know all about parenting, especially since the more children I have the fewer answers I have. People who have never been divorced know the answer to every marriage problem. Religious fundamentalists claim to have all the answers.

A man by the name of Browning Ware, a Baptist pastor, wrote about having all the answers. He said:

*When younger, I thought there was an answer to every problem. And for a time, I knew many of the answers.*

- *I knew about parenting until I had children.*
- *I knew about divorce until I got one.*
- *I knew about suicide until three of my closest friends took their lives in the same year.*
- *I knew about the death of a child until my child died.*

*I'm not as impressed with answers as I once was. Answers seem so pallid, sucked dry of blood and void of life. Knowing answers seduces us into making pronouncements. I still have a few friends or acquaintances who are 100 percent sure on most anything and are ready to make pronouncements on homosexuality, AIDS, marriage problems, teen-age pregnancies, abortion, sex education, or whatever is coming down the pike. But when we get shoved into our valley of the shadow, a pronouncement is the last thing we need.*

After his wife of just a few years died of cancer, C.S. Lewis said, “You never really know how much you believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life or death to you.”

In today's story, Jesus doesn't give us answers about what life looks like in the resurrection, but he does affirm two things: one, that the resurrected life is vastly different than the life we know now; and two: we will spend that life with God.

As to the first affirmation, that the resurrected life is vastly different than what we know now: I think what Jesus is telling us *in this story* is that the ordinary events and relationships by which we track our journey through this mortal life -- marriage, childbirth, graduations, retirements and so on -- do not characterize our eternal lives because resurrection life is **not merely** an extension of this life but is something wholly different. Resurrection is something much more than we can grasp and words can describe.

As to the second affirmation, which Christians affirm and Jesus touches on today, is that resurrection is not the same thing as immortality. Immortality of the soul is a Greek idea, which promises that some spiritual element of a person persists beyond the physical death of the body. Christians affirm that we die, that there's no escaping it. And, unlike immortality of the soul, we affirm that in the resurrection our whole selves will in some way be united with God – not just a piece of them. What we hope, and what we believe, is that the whole person, the whole person created, loved, and now redeemed by God in and through Christ, rests wholly with Jesus Christ in his or her death.

Will we see our loved ones in heaven? I can't give a definitive answer on that. But here's what I believe. I believe what our Brief Statement of Faith affirms, which is that "In life and in death we belong to God." While this doesn't give us answers as to what heaven is like, it does affirm that we belong to God now, and we will belong to God in our deaths. I also believe, because the scriptures witness to this, that God is a God of love. So somehow, I believe, because God is a God of love, and because we belong to God in our deaths, we will be in the company of those we love. Beyond that, I don't have any answers, and none of us know for certain what, or who, will greet us.

Jesus doesn't give us detailed answers about what the resurrection will be like or look like or feel like, but he does assure us that we'll spend it in the presence of God and that is good enough for me.

Amen.

Sources:

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