

Sermon 12 April 2026 Life after Death

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 Luke 20:27-38

Last week, we focused on Christ's resurrection to a physical life. Today we look at our resurrection to a spiritual life, in other words, life after death. This lies very much at the heart of our Christian faith, and indeed, is very much part of our culture. How often do we hear references to heaven and even hell in secular settings, situations which have absolutely nothing to do with the topic of religion? This is a very interesting exchange between Jesus and the Sadducees on the issue of resurrection. So firstly, let's have a look at just who the Sadducees were.

The Sadducees were a religious faction that wielded great power in nearly every aspect of society except military. They were the Jewish aristocrats of their day, very wealthy and extremely influential, and they hated Jesus. They saw him as a huge threat to their position of privilege.

The interesting thing about the Sadducees was that they did not believe in heaven, hell or resurrection, hence their challenge to Jesus. They believed in the traditional Jewish concept of Sheol for those who had died. So what is Sheol?

Sheol is a place of darkness to which all the dead go, both the righteous and the not so righteous, regardless of the moral choices made in life. It is a place of stillness and darkness cut off from life and separated from God. Job gives us a good idea of the concept of Sheol: *'...before I go to the place of no return, to the land of gloom and utter darkness, to the land of deepest night, of utter darkness and disorder, where even light is like darkness.'* Job 10:21-22. Not much to look forward to!

So the Sadducees put this question to Jesus of a life after death in the context of seven brothers dying. In Jewish law, if a man dies it is the duty of his brother to marry his widow. In this rather ridiculous scenario as given by the Sadducees, each of the seven brothers die, each having married the widow (I have a degree of sympathy for the widow). Their question to Jesus is, who does she belong to if there is such a thing as resurrection to a new life, albeit a spiritual one? *'Finally, the woman also died. So tell us, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? For all seven were married to her!'* Luke 20:33.

Jesus makes the point that this new life is a spiritual life but they are talking in physical terms. You just cannot apply the same principles. He points out that our physical bodies have perished but our souls live on. He emphasises this by referring to what God said to Moses from the burning bush: *'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'* Exodus 3:5. The point is, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have long since died, but their spirits live on with God. And so it is with us. We die but we live on with God in spiritual form.

This concept, this belief in a spiritual life after death is of vital importance to the Christian faith, and it is reasonably complex, mainly because we don't have tangible proof of its reality. But here we have Jesus giving a succinct and easily understandable answer to this question. For me, this response to the Sadducees is so very typical of Jesus and encapsulates his form of teaching, which is straightforward and uncomplicated. William Barclay, renowned Biblical commentator, who himself expresses his commentaries in a straightforward manner, puts it so very well, *'Jesus expressed himself in a way that people could easily understand. He talked to them in their own language; he met them on their own ground.'* This is precisely why people, people like you and me, flocked to hear him.

All too often I have read a book expounding the life and teaching of Jesus, or the tenets of the Christian faith, and the language used is nothing like the language Jesus would have used. Jesus was concise and to the point. As Barclay said, he used imagery and language that his listeners, people like you and me, could relate to and understand. That is why he was such a brilliant teacher.

Going back to the issue of life after death. There is no doubt that this is something we should be working towards and there is no doubt that this is something we can look forward to.

There is the story of the sons of John D Rockefeller, who was the co-founder of Standard Oil and extremely wealthy, to say the least. Their father wanted his sons to know what the life of a working man was really all about. To achieve that end, he insisted that they go and labour in the oil fields. For more than two years the Rockefeller boys worked on drilling rigs. They worked long and arduous

hours. At the end of each day, they were exhausted and they had to endure the unpleasantness that comes with being covered in oil and working in hot conditions.

One day, as they were trading stories over a few glasses of beer with their fellow workers, one of the Rockefellers was asked how he liked being among the common workers and experiencing the arduous working conditions. He responded, 'I love it! This has been one of the best times of my life.'

The man who asked the question said, with an edge of sarcasm to his voice, 'That's because you know you're not staying. You know there is something better out there waiting for you when this is all over. You would look at things differently if you thought that working in these oil fields was all there was for you.'

He had a point! But likewise, if we know there is something better to look forward to, then our attitude and approach might be quite different. How we deal with the challenge of this life, how we conduct ourselves in this life, will determine the quality of that next life. If I had to reply in one sentence to the question, 'What is the purpose of life?' my reply would be, 'To prepare for the next life,' or to put it very simply, 'To make sure I go upstairs rather than downstairs!'

I quote from our first reading, '*For we all must stand before Christ and be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or the evil we have done in our bodies.*' 2 Corinthians 5:10. That is indeed a sobering wake-up call for us all. It is those words I have in mind when I say my purpose in life is to prepare for the next life.

I have another quote for you, a Cherokee proverb: '*When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. May you live your life so that when you die, the world will cry and you will rejoice.*'

To finish, time for a smile. A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because even though it was a very large animal, its throat was very small.

The little girl stated that a whale swallowed Jonah. Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible. The little girl said, 'When I get to heaven, I will ask Jonah.' The teacher asked, 'What if Jonah went to hell?' The little girl replied, 'Then you ask him.'