

“God of the Living” (Luke 20:27–44)

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We don't live in a culture that seeks to understand. We live in a culture of people who think they're right and want to shut down anyone opposed to them. Or, that's how it seems to me, at least. It appears that many people of different persuasions want to assume that what others believe is incoherent, and, if put to the test, absurd. And the way that people sometimes try to prove this is through what you might call a “gotcha” question.

Let me give you an example of such a question that some Christians have asked atheists who believe in some form of Darwinian evolution. They ask something like this, “If humans have evolved from apes, why are there still apes?” The question is supposed to expose how foolish the evolutionists are. Now, I don't believe in some form of Darwinian evolution, or what is called macroevolution. I don't believe that random, undirected mutations of DNA could, against all the odds, produce different species. I don't believe in that for theological reasons, but also scientific ones. I have studied what neo-Darwinians believe and I find errors in their reasoning. And because of that, I recognize that the “gotcha question” I posed earlier is a really bad one. Darwinians don't believe that we evolved from apes who, inexplicably, still exist when natural selection should have wiped them out. No, they believe that we and modern apes have a common ancestor, an ape-like species that no longer exists. To quote an atheistic neo-Darwinian, Jerry Coyne, “We are apes descended from other apes, and our closest cousin is the chimpanzee, whose ancestors diverged from our own several million years ago in Africa.”¹

Now, I'm not going to talk a lot more about evolution. My point is that Christians can engage in this “gotcha” question business. Of course, atheists do it, too. You've probably heard someone question your belief in the Bible by asking a question like, “Adam and Eve (at first) had two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain killed Abel, and then we're told Cain had a wife. Where did she come from?” Or, atheists and Muslims might question the doctrine of the Trinity. “How can God

¹ Jerry A. Coyne, *Why Evolution Is True* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 192. He goes on to assert, “These are indisputable facts.” Well, no they aren't facts. We don't have irrefutable proof of such an evolution. As some have said, the theory is underdetermined by the data. For a fine refutation of Darwinian evolution (in its original and modern forms), see Stephen Meyer, *Darwin's Doubt: The Explosive Origin of Animal Life and the Case for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013). See also my review essay on these books: <https://wbcommunity.org/two-views-evolution>.

be one and three? Isn't that a contradiction?" They might question the doctrine of the incarnation: "How can Jesus be fully God and fully man?"

There are many different answers to those questions. Adam and Eve might have had daughters that we're not told about, and Cain could have married one of them. God is three persons who share one divine substance, who are so united in their thoughts, will, and purpose that they act as one. Jesus is the only person with two natures, one divine and one human. And there are excellent books written about these subjects.²

But my point is not to answer those questions in detail. I bring all of this up because today, in the Gospel of Luke, we're going to see some of Jesus' enemies ask him a "gotcha" question. They don't come to him seeking to understand what he believed. Instead, they try to trap him with what they think is not only a tricky question, but one that can't be answered well at all. And Jesus answers them by showing that they're wrong. Then, he asks his own "gotcha" question, and they can't, or won't, answer him.

We'll see all of this in Luke 20:27–44. I invite you to turn there now. If you haven't been with us, the Gospel of Luke is one of four biographies of Jesus that we have in the Bible. We're getting closer to the end of the story that Luke tells. Jesus is now in Jerusalem, and it's three days before he will be crucified. He is facing opposition from all kinds of people, including different groups of Jewish theologians and leaders and politicians. Eventually, he'll face Gentiles, too. None of these people can show that Jesus is in the wrong.

We'll begin by reading verses 27–33:

²⁷ There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, ²⁸ and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. ³⁰ And the second ³¹ and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. ³² Afterward the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife."³

² The books that deal with creation are many. I would recommend books by Hugh Ross as a starting place. For the Trinity, see Michael Reeves (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012) or Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017). For the incarnation, see Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (1986; reprint, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2001) or Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

We've met the Pharisees before. They were one group of prominent Jewish religious leaders in Jesus' time. Now, we meet the Sadducees. They were "the priestly aristocracy of the Jewish people."⁴ The name "Sadducee" comes from Zadok, who served as high priest about a thousand years earlier, when Solomon was the king of Israel. Many of the high priests in the first century were Sadducees. But most English speakers learn who they are by this little saying: "The Sadducees denied life after death, which is why they were sad, you see." Luke tells us that they denied there is a resurrection. They also didn't believe that all of the Hebrew Bible was binding. They adhered to the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses. And, they thought, since those books don't clearly teach about the afterlife, there must not be any.

These men come up to Jesus to try to show him that the doctrine of life after death is absurd. So, they come up with an outlandish scenario. But first, they quote Moses. What they're referring to is part of the law that God gave to Israel through Moses. This is what Deuteronomy 25:5–6 says:

⁵ If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. ⁶ And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

This practice is very strange to our modern ears, but the law held that if a man dies, leaving a childless widow, his brother should take the widow as a wife and give her a son. In that day, widows were very vulnerable. They wouldn't or couldn't make much money, and they would have to rely upon the kindness of strangers, as it were, to survive. But perhaps more importantly, if the dead man had no left no children to carry on his name, it would "be blotted out of Israel." It would be as if the man never lived. In the Sadducees' way of thinking, since there is no afterlife, the only way to have one's memory retained is through descendants. Perhaps some atheists today might think something similar: it's important to leave a legacy.

Assuming that law, and that people are married in the resurrection, the Sadducees then present their absurd scenario, which isn't seven brides for seven brothers, but one bride for seven brothers. A woman is married to one brother who dies, leaving her without a child. Brother two steps in, but he dies before the woman can have a son. The same happens with brothers three,

⁴ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Jesus in Jerusalem: The Last Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 71.

four, five, six, and seven. So, this poor woman has been married to all seven brothers, not one of which has fathered a child.

Now, the Sadducees, ask, perhaps holding back their snickering, “In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?” They assume that life in the resurrection will be like this life, only eternal. They assume that people will be married in that life. So, who will this woman be married to? Not one of these brothers has a better claim on her than the others. Will she be married to all seven? That seems absurd. In fact, the Sadducees are employing a tactic called *reduction ad absurdum*: they think they are reducing a belief in the resurrection to an absurdity. If we are raised from the dead, they think, then absurd situations will result.

Now, using that technique isn’t always wrong. Sometimes the best way to test out an idea is to see what consequences would follow from it if it were true. But to use that technique rightly, you have to understand the idea in the first place. And that’s where these men fail.

Let’s look at Jesus’ answer in verses 34–40:

³⁴ And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, ³⁵ but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, ³⁶ for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. ³⁷ But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. ³⁸ Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.” ³⁹ Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” ⁴⁰ For they no longer dared to ask him any question.

Jesus tells them they’re wrong. I don’t know why, but Luke doesn’t include what Matthew and Mark do. In Matthew 22:29, Jesus says, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.” The Sadducees don’t understand the Hebrew Bible, they don’t understand the resurrection, and they don’t understand that God has the power to raise up people from the dead.

So, Jesus corrects them. He says that people marry in this age, but they won’t do that in the new creation. In the new creation, there is no death, and no need to produce more people. Procreation will no longer be needed. And God’s purpose for marriage will have an end. I’ll explain why in a moment. But the key thing that Jesus is correcting is their assumption that eternal life is going to be exactly like this life, only infinitely longer. Jesus is implying that things will be dramatically different in the new creation.

Then, to show that the Sadducees are wrong about their denial of the resurrection, Jesus meets them where they are. It's like he's saying, "You believe in what Moses wrote? I do, too. Now, don't you know in Exodus 3, when God speaks to Moses at the burning bush, he says that he *is* the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Those men were dead for hundreds of years. God didn't say he *was* their God. No, he still is, because Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob still exist. They haven't been resurrected yet, but they will be one day. Still, they're alive as spirits in heaven. God is the God of the living, not the dead."

The technique that Jesus uses here is a great one to use. You start by pointing out something that both you and your debate partner agree on. Then, you show how your beliefs better explain that agreed-upon data better than your opponent's beliefs. Christians, we can do this with human rights. We can say to atheists and agnostics, "You believe in human rights? I do, too. Now, if there's no God and we're the product of undirected, impersonal forces, why should all humans have rights. If we're continually evolving, and if natural selection tends to eliminate the least fit members of a species, why shouldn't we treat only those who are healthy, smart, and talented as fully human and ignore the needs of the disabled and people who are less gifted? That really doesn't make sense. But if we're all created by God and loved by God, then regardless of our abilities, we are all valuable."

You can do that with other issues, such as rationality, or human intelligence. You could say to the atheist, "You believe that humans have intelligence and can discover the truth? So do I. But if we're the products of undirected, impersonal, unintelligent forces, and if evolution is driven by the survival of the fittest, then that means that everything about us is tuned for survival, not truth. If every organ of our body, including our brains, are the product of the survival of the fittest, then that means they are good at surviving. But that doesn't mean our brains will know what is true. Perhaps our brains believe a lot of useful fictions, lies that help us survive longer. But if we're the products of a super intelligence, God, who has made us in his image and after his likeness, then we are intelligent, too, and can come to know the truth."

That may sound strange at first, but a number of people, including Darwin himself, have realized that if the universe is the product of a godless process of evolution, then there's no reason to trust our brains. Even Darwin had this thought.⁵ If our thoughts are just the result of

⁵ In a letter to William Graham, written on July 3, 1881, Darwin wrote, "With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any

chemical reactions in our brains, then there's no reason to trust they are true. But we couldn't get anywhere in our thinking if that were the case. That's why C. S. Lewis once wrote, "A theory which explained everything else in the whole universe but which made it impossible to believe that our thinking was valid, would be utterly out of court."⁶

Jesus' answer is brilliant, and even some of his other opponents, the scribes can recognize this. And at this point, no one else—not the Pharisees, the scribes, the Herodians, or the Sadducees—dared ask Jesus another "gotcha" question.

I'm going to come back to the idea of resurrection in a moment, but first I want to see how Jesus asks his own question. Let's look at verses 41–44:

⁴¹ But he said to them, "How can they say that the Christ is David's son? ⁴² For David himself says in the Book of Psalms,

 "The Lord said to my Lord,
 "Sit at my right hand,
⁴³ until I make your enemies your footstool."

⁴⁴ David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?"

This is a bit tricky to understand if you don't know the Bible. In the Old Testament, God made many promises made that one day, a special person would come who would fix all of the problems of Israel and all of the problems of the world. And, just to give us a more complete picture of the biblical story, in case we don't know it, in the beginning God made the universe to be a theater for his glory, a temple where he and his people would dwell together in harmony. He made us in his image and after his likeness, which means that we were supposed to have a special relationship with God, one marked by our love of God, our worship of God, and our obedience to God. But the first human beings didn't love and trust God, and therefore they disobeyed. Ever since, we have lived apart from God's special presence, separated from him by our sin, which is our rebellion against him. God didn't abandon his creation, however. He always had a plan to bring his people back to himself. He even promised that one day he would recreate the universe to be a perfect place once again. That's what I mean when I talk of the resurrection

value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?" In *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin Including an Autobiographical Chapter*, ed. Francis Darwin (London: John Murray, Albermarle Street, 1887), 1:315–16, quoted in Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 316.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, rev. ed. (1960; New York: HarperOne, 2001), 21.

or the new creation. God will recreate the world so that his people live with him forever in a real, physical world, one that doesn't have an evil or death.

God promised that there would be someone who could bring about this new creation, who could fix this mess. We learn that this figure would come from Israel, from one of Abraham's descendants. More specifically, he would be of the tribe of Judah. Later, we learn that he will be a descendant of David, the greatest king of Israel who lived and reigned roughly a thousand years before Jesus was on the Earth. This figure would, like kings and priests, be anointed. That's why he's called Messiah, which is based on a Hebrew word for "anointed," or Christ, which is based on a Greek word for "anointed."

So, Jesus quotes the beginning of Psalm 110, which he says was written by David. Again, this would have been written about a thousand years earlier. In the Psalm, David says that "the Lord," which we can understand as God or, more specifically, God the Father, said to David's "Lord," "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." The "right hand" isn't a literal description as much as a description of power. Whoever is God's "right hand man" shares his position of power and authority. God says to David's Lord, "Come here until I put all your enemies under your feet." Now, in Jesus' day, it was assumed that David's "Lord" would be a king who is his descendant. It could have referred to Solomon, his son. But it doesn't seem to describe Solomon very well. It seems to be talking about the Christ, a descendant of David who would do more than Solomon could ever do.

Now, how could David, the king, refer to his own descendant as "Lord." Fathers don't usually address their sons as their own leaders. In David's case, his son Solomon wouldn't become king until after David died. Who could be David's "Lord" when he wrote this Psalm? That's what Jesus is asking when he says, "David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?"

Jesus doesn't get an answer from his enemies. Luke doesn't tell us that clearly, but Matthew says, "no one was able to answer him a word" (Matt. 22:46). What Jesus was getting his audience to consider was that the Christ had to be greater than David, and probably not a mere human being. Because we have the whole Bible, we can answer Jesus' question. Jesus is David's Lord. As the Son of God, he has always existed. He existed in David's day. And he has all the authority and power of God the Father. In fact, other passages in the New Testament say that Jesus is at the right hand of God the Father (Acts 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22) and that Jesus will reign until all enemies, including

death, are “under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:25–26). Jesus is both David’s son and his God and King, as strange as that may seem, because he is both God and man. The Son of God became a human being over two thousand years ago. He did this without ceasing to be God. He added a second nature to himself, one that coordinates with his divine nature so that he is one person with two natures, fully divine and yet also fully human. And, by the way, David’s son can be his Lord only if there is a resurrection, if David is still exists as a spirit and will, one day, be raised in bodily form from the grave.

Jesus is the answer to the riddle that he asks, just as Jesus is the answer to other riddles of the Old Testament. In Moses’s day, almost fifteen hundred years earlier, God said that he is “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Exod. 34:6–7). How can God be merciful and gracious, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and also be a God “who will by no means clear the guilty”? Which is it? Is he going to forgive sin or punish sin? Perhaps it’s both. God’s plan to fix the problems of the world focuses on the problem of sin, because sin is what corrupted the world. To renew the world, God must remove sin. But how can God remove and even destroy sin without destroying his people? If the penalty for sin is death, which is what the Bible says (Rom. 6:23), then how can God be a righteous judge and punish sin without everyone dying forever?

The answer is Jesus. When the Son of God became man, he came to do what we cannot. He came to live a perfect life, always loving, honoring, and obeying God the Father and loving other people. Though he was perfect, he took the death penalty for his people. He died on the cross, an instrument of torture and execution reserved for the enemies of the Roman Empire. But when Jesus died, he didn’t just die a painful death—a literally excruciating death. He also faced the wrath of God, the spiritual punishment for our sin. The best way to understand this quickly is to think of him enduring hell on Earth so that his people don’t have to go to hell. All who trust in Jesus, who put their faith in him and swear their allegiance to him, will be spared that fate.

After Jesus died, he rose from the grave, in a body that cannot die again. He did this to show that the penalty for sin had been paid, that he has power of sin and death, that he is the Son of God, and that his predictions of death and resurrection were true. He also rose from the grave

as the first installment of a new creation, a guarantee that someday in the future, all of God's people will have a resurrection. Jesus then ascended to heaven, to sit at the right hand of God the Father. But he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. Everyone will have a resurrected body, and everyone will live forever. But not everyone will be in the new creation with God. Those who don't put their trust in Jesus will be cast out, into darkness, into torment.

So, this passage teaches us about the identity of Jesus. He has the same authority and power as God, which is why God the Father can say to him that he is his righthand man. He is the Son of God, which doesn't mean he has less power or authority than God the Father. But he's also David's son because he was born to a descendant of David, Mary, and he lived life as a real, though unique, human being. And from the whole Bible, we know that Jesus is the answer to sin and death. He is the key that unlocks the riddles of the Bible and the gate to the new creation.

We also get a brief glimpse of what life in that new creation will be like. We don't have a lot of specific information about what life in that perfect world will be like, but from what God has revealed to us, we know that there will be continuities and discontinuities. In other words, some things will be the same, and other things will be different. God's people will live on Earth, but the Earth will be perfected, with no more sin and evil, no more decay. We will have bodies that are recognizable, but they won't have the effects of decay and they won't die. We will worship God, but our worship will be enhanced because will be directly in God's presence. And we will have relationships with each other, but they will be different. We will no longer be married to one another. Instead, we will be married to God. That sounds really strange at first, but think about what marriage is. It's supposed to be a lifelong, exclusive relationship of love. We're told in the Bible that the reason that God created marriage is to provide a picture of the relationship between himself and his people (Eph. 5:32–33). Our marriages right now foreshadow the true marriage. God could have made humans from scratch, instead of having them procreate. He could have made humans that multiply in other ways that don't involve sex. And God didn't need to create the only right context for sex, which is marriage. But he did all of this to provide a picture of the relationship he will have forever with his people. Marriage is one metaphor of the relationship between God and his people. There are others. Christ is the head of his body, which is the church. The Holy Spirit dwells in the temple, which is now the church. God is the King of his royal subjects. He is the Master of his servants. Jesus is also our friend and brother. Each metaphor provides us with a different understanding of our relationship to

God. In a similar way, Jesus is our groom and we Christians are his bride. That doesn't mean anything sexual, by the way. That relationship transcends sex and romance. It means that we are bound to one God in an exclusive relationship that includes love and trust. When we make other things more important to our lives, we're cheating on God. God wants us to be faithful.

Now, the whole idea of no marriage and no sex in eternity sounds very strange to us. We tend to think that sex is one of the most pleasurable experiences that this life provides. But what we don't know is that eternal life will be so pleasurable and so amazing that we won't miss sex. To understand this, I want to quote again from C. S. Lewis. This passage comes from the book I already quoted, *Miracles*:

The letter and spirit of scripture, and of all Christianity, forbid us to suppose that life in the New Creation will be a sexual life; and this reduces our imagination to the withering alternative either of bodies which are hardly recognisable as human bodies at all or else of a perpetual fast. As regards the fast, I think our present outlook might be like that of a small boy who, on being told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure should immediately ask whether you ate chocolates at the same time. On receiving the answer 'No,' he might regard absence of chocolates as the chief characteristic of sexuality. In vain would you tell him that the reason why lovers in their carnal raptures don't bother about chocolates is that they have something better to think of. The boy knows chocolate: he does not know the positive thing that excludes it. We are in the same position. We know the sexual life; we do not know, except in glimpses, the other thing which, in Heaven, will leave no room for it. Hence where fullness awaits us we anticipate fasting.⁷

When we hear about the fact that there won't be marriage or sex in the new creation, we're like kids who can't imagine that sex would exclude what we think is the great pleasure. Perhaps today kids would think that would be playing video games. They might say, "If I can't play video games while doing that, well, I don't want to do that at all." That's because they can't imagine a greater pleasure. Right now, we can't imagine that life in the new creation with God will be so much better than our experience right now that we won't lack for anything. But that's what God has told us. Life with him will blow our minds. It will be like this life, only far, far, far greater, to such an extent that we really can't understand it now. But the reason life will be so much better is because we'll be with him, and there's nothing greater than him.

If you are a Christian, continue to put your hope in Christ and live your life in light of eternity. There are things that are more important than marriage and career and entertainments.

⁷ Lewis, *Miracles*, 260–61.

Even the suffering of this life will be counted as nothing in light of eternity. In fact, our suffering will make us appreciate eternity even more (2 Cor. 4:16–18).

If you are not a Christian, I will tell you this: The only way to experience real life after death, and the only way to have pleasures so great that even sex will count as nothing, is to trust in Jesus. He is the answer to the riddles of your own life. Humble yourself, confess your sin to him, and follow him as if he is your King. He is the only one who can conquer sin and death and unlock the door to a new, greater, more pleasurable eternal life.