

OPENER:

Eric Clapton, the famous musician, made a musical shift in the early 1990s with his song: “Tears in Heaven.” Written after the tragic death of Clapton’s 4 year old son in 1991, the song asked rhetorically “Would you know my name, if I saw you in heaven?”

This was a turn for a musician whose notoriety for his marital infidelities and the consequences of his drug addiction had competed with his virtuoso guitar playing and song writing capabilities.

“Tears in Heaven” was a massive hit, it won multiple Grammy’s and a few years back *Rolling Stone* magazine listed it as the saddest song of all time, according to a poll of its readers.¹

“Would you know my name, if I saw you in heaven?”

“Would it be the same, if I saw you in heaven?”²

QUESTION:

Pastoral wisdom urges one to answer “yes” to both questions. In our reading, however—also about life, death and the next world—we hear that Jesus’ answer to the second question might be “no”—that things might not be the same in heaven.

Regardless, Clapton’s are fair questions, especially for a grieving father, to ask.

The Sadducees’ questions, on the other hand, are unfair questions.

The Sadducees are trying to catch Jesus in a trap, trying to play the country bumpkin preacher as a fool. As the Temple elite, they are trying to expose the shortcomings of his education and training. They don’t mean the question to stand on its own merits but rather to ridicule and demean Jesus.

¹ Andy Greene. “Readers’ Poll: The 10 Saddest Songs of All Time” *Rolling Stone* (October 2, 2013)
<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/readers-poll-the-10-saddest-songs-of-all-time-10875/1-eric-clapton-tears-in-heaven-208829/>

² “Tears in Heaven” Eric Clapton and Will Jennings (Blue Sky Rider Songs/ Irving Music/ Unichappell Music, Inc., 1992).

MARRIAGE:

This question also has a stronger bite to it because, 2000 years ago, marriage and procreation occupied a different place in the culture than they do now. To further one's family/ tribe, etc. occupied the highest of societal importance and to be unable to do so was looked on as a flaw.

Another added element of cruelty to the situation is that Jesus is “answering this question, about men who die childless, stand(ing there) himself a celibate, childless man, before those who are about to send him to his death.”³

And so we should be reminded how strange this all is, this itinerant prophet preaching about a different type of family, beyond the nuclear, beyond the biological.

ANSWER:

Jesus doesn't blink though. Jesus responds with patience and forbearance, attempting to meet the Sadducees where they are at.

The context from Moses' law, that the Sadducees are referring to in this story, is that the widow **MUST** be married to someone. The supposition is that women need to belong to men, because otherwise they will be under threat. The supposition is that no one would take care of them, without that marriage arrangement. That's the basis of the custom, if we are willing to give it the benefit of the doubt.

And in today's English, we still have the idiomatic expression: “You *take* someone as your wife.” In our reading, that is what literally is being said, each successive brother “takes” the wife rather than our more vanilla translation “to marry”.⁴ Thus, the widow is “taken” 7 times by each succeeding husband/ brother as a possession.

STORY

And we are not so removed from that time period, to think that we have this all figured out.

³ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 419n67.

⁴ Luke 20.28,29,31.

At a funeral for a man who had been married twice with his first wife having died, an adult child from the first marriage said in the eulogy that “Now Dad can be with Mom.”

The second wife, understandably, was upset with this and asked her priest for an answer. “Who belongs to the man, me or his first wife?”

The priest had this Scripture in hand and said “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but... in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.”

That did not satisfy her.

She asked “could you please explain what that means?”

And he said, “well, in the resurrection, you don’t belong to anyone. You belong to God. At that place and time, we all belong to one another.”

That was better. But not completely satisfying, because it does not say “you get exactly what you want.” In other words, to answer Clapton’s question: “Things might not be the same.”

Behind Jesus’ answer is a startling redefinition of personhood and identity in the next world, and, by extension, in this one. Jesus is answering that question: “Would it be the same?” by saying “NO, things will not be the same.... Women will no longer be men’s property.”⁵

RESURRECTION:

Jesus says that it will all be different in the resurrection, that these questions don’t apply here, that the Sadducees are making a category mistake.

And Jesus is also arguing with them about this world, talking about the very “real” issues of marriage and procreation. Ultimately, Jesus’ answer is a different, dare I say richer one, than simply this idea of what the next world looks like.

⁵ J. Peter Holmes, “Homiletical Perspective.” in Jarvis, Cynthia A., and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds. 2014. *Feasting on the Gospels: a Feasting on the Word Commentary*, (Luke, Chapters 12-24 Volume 2) 207.

Jesus is saying “Watch what God is up to via the resurrection.” Watch how there will also be a new age coming towards us that does not feature the patriarchy that this one espouses.

The Sadducees were terrified of the notion of the resurrection because it meant that the people opposing them, such as Jesus, had something beyond this world to look to in hope. Those type of people might be willing to take some serious risks about upending the status quo, they might be willing to lose it all, they might be willing to endure past what they can see in this world.

This example was never be more clearly demonstrated than with the witness of the Early Christians. Paul’s letters and the history of the early Church was wrapped up with this idea of not having to get married. And that was less about sex, and more about saying you don’t need to get married because *we*, your Christian community, your Christian family will take care of you. Previously people said you need to get married because you don’t trust the community. Jesus responds by saying protection and procreation isn’t the final statement, that life, your life, is will be valued and cared for in this world and in the next.

CONCLUSION

Back to Clapton, as sometimes happened, Clapton was able to use his art to channel and process his grief over his son. He eventually remarried to another wife (number 3) and have three children. He seems to have settled into aging elder Rockstar/ statesman of the 1960/70s. It seems ridiculous though to ask which of his wives belong to him in heaven.

He stopped playing the song “Tears in Heaven” in 2004 because he said he did not feel the loss as profoundly anymore. But the answer to his question lies in Jesus’ response to the Sadducees in our reading today and all throughout Scripture: “Abundant life explodes boundaries.” (1 Cor. 2.9). The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth.” ---Isaiah 25.8 And most famously:

“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”—Revelation 7:17.

AMEN