

Jesus said to them, “Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?”

(Mark 12:24)

Introduction

We go wrong when we “know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Mark 12:24). That was the Lord’s assessment of the Sadducees. Because they were ignorant of the Scriptures, and because they were therefore ignorant about the will and the ways of God, they had wandered from God. (The word translated “wrong” comes from a Greek word meaning “to wander.”) In fact, Jesus said that they were “quite wrong” (Mark 12:27). They had wandered quite far from God. To add to this pathetic state, they had also led others astray.

The Sadducees rejected the doctrine of the resurrection, even though the Scriptures clearly teach the immortality of the believer and their necessary resurrection (Genesis 5:24; 22:5; Job 19:26; Psalm 73:23–24; Isaiah 26:19; Ezekiel 37:3–6; Daniel 12:2). Though they boasted of their adherence to the first five books of the Bible (they thought they were faithful conservatives since they held to such a small canon), Jesus admonished them that they were ignorant of God’s word. This ignorance was a factor – perhaps *the* factor – in their attendant ignorance of the power of God. Their truncation of God’s word resulted in a truncated God. In the words of J. B. Phillips, their God was “too small.” They did not know the Scripture and they therefore did not know God. They had no clue what God could do because they rejected what God had revealed. No wonder they were sad, do you see?

Are you like the Sadducees? Too often I am. Though I know a lot more Scripture than they did (because I hold to a lot more Scripture than they did), I nevertheless, like them, live like I am ignorant of the power of God. I live like an agnostic. In this study, I want us to briefly revisit this text, and particularly v. 24, in an attempt to encourage us to overcome our agnosticism; to help us to truly believe and to behave like we believe in the power of God.

The Danger of Being Religious but Agnostic

The Sadducees were religiously agnostic. When Jesus rebuked them for their lack of knowledge, he didn’t use the term “agnostic” [literally, “ignorant”] but his point was the same. They talked about their belief in God but, really, did not believe.

These religious leaders looked the part. They were in the right location (the temple). They often said things that were correct and, of course, talked about God. The problem was, they did not believe him – because they didn’t know him. For this reason, Jesus warned his

disciples to beware of their teaching (Matthew 16:5-12). They were religious but dangerous; religious but lost.

I think our congregation is well aware that not everyone who claims to be a “man of God” is. Some pastors and teachers appear as angels of light who, in fact, are of the darkness (2 Corinthians 11:13-14). John Newton once preached a sermon and afterwards wrote to a friend:

I spoke a little of Satan’s trials, from 2 Cor 2:11. The good Lord keeps us from his delusions: [Satan] is always dangerous, but never more so than when he pleads for gospel doctrines in order to abuse them, and when he tries to pass his counterfeit humility, zeal, and sanctity upon us for pure gold. No coiner [counterfeiter] can equal him for imitation. Where Christ has a church, he will have a synagogue; where the Spirit produces any graces, he, like the magicians of Egypt, will do something as like it, and yet as unlike it as possible. He has something that comes near the gospel, that it is called by St Paul another gospel and yet in reality is no gospel at all.

This would describe the Sadducees.

But let’s turn the laser pointer on us. *We* need to beware of being religious and yet agnostic — of professing faith in Christ but living like we don’t know or trust him. This is possible in one of two ways.

First, we face the danger of being a true hypocrite: of professing faith without possessing it. I recently heard an interview with Paul Washer’s wife. She told of a time when he preached a particularly powerful sermon. Afterwards, she told him that, by all the measures he stated, she could not confidently assert that she was a Christian. Listening to her, he agreed. At home, she grabbed her Bible and spent the next several hours alone, wrestling with God in prayer. In the early hours of the next morning, she came to him, smiling, and telling him that she had been converted. For so long, she had professed faith without possessing it. There are no doubt many more who do the same.

We need to examine ourselves whether we be in the faith. Let us be those who look to Jesus Christ alone as our Saviour. Cry out to him. And if you have, then you will often cry out to him, “Be merciful to me, my Saviour!”

Second, and this is my primary concern, we face the danger of living like an agnostic though truly a Christian. Each of us can relate to this at one time or another. We put on a religious mask and garb but live without hope and without confidence in God’s love. To paraphrase a friend, we need to stop living like an orphan and start living as if God is our Father. We can do religion and yet remain sad and hopeless, rather than glad and hopeful. We don’t live with the assurance that Jesus has overcome the world! We are sad, you see?

Have you ever been there? Are you there now? What is the problem behind this? In Jesus' words, at least for the moment, we know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God – like the Sadducees. Like the Sadducees, we do not know the scope of the Scriptures (their fullness, their comprehensive authority and sufficiency). Like the Sadducees we don't see beyond the surface of them.

So, what then is the solution? The solution is to know the Scriptures as a means to knowing the Sovereign. The word of God is a means to this end. This brings us to the next point.

Overcome Ignorance of God with the Knowledge of God

We must work to overcome ignorance of God with the knowledge of God. To do this requires at least two things.

First, we need to *study* all of Scripture as the word of God. We must expose ourselves to the full counsel of God by sitting under its teaching. We must exert the effort to dig deep into it.

Second, we need to *submit* to all of Scripture as the word of God. We need to experience Scripture as God's authoritative truth by actually doing what Scripture requires of us. As we learn God's word, sitting under it rather than standing over it (as did the Sadducees), we are to obey it. This will result in experiencing God's word, which will lead to the next thing that we need.

But before we consider that, pause and ask yourself, what will I do with the truth of God's word preached? Day by day, week by week, what will I do to overcome my ignorance of Scripture and the awful ignorance of not knowing the power of God? What effort will I exert?

We Need to Know the Power of Our God

It was because the Sadducees denied the Scriptures *from* God that they did not know the power *of* God. This led to their ridiculous question. They could not look beyond their own senses and therefore concluded that, if there was life beyond the grave, it would simply be like life on this side of the grave. They rejected God's word and therefore rejected God's ability. They rejected God's word and therefore could not see beyond their own perceptions, which are sometimes our assumptions.

When we are ignorant of Scripture, our perceptions assume a sovereignty that rightly belongs to God alone. We then desire to be in control. We then assume that *we* know the future. We then succumb to the bondage of living for the here and now rather than with an eternal perspective. You cannot have an earthly perspective and a heavenly perspective at the same time. Jesus made it clear that we serve one or the other (Matthew 6:19–34).

What Difference Does it Make?

It makes all the difference in the world. And in the next world.

In the closing chapters of Mark's Gospel, we see wave upon wave of attack upon our Lord Jesus. But in spite of these attempts to trap him, Jesus emerged the victor. He could take a punch. He could take a lot of them, even to the point of dying. And he could do so because he knew the Scriptures and (therefore) the power of God.

Jesus knew the Scriptures that pointed to him as the serpent-crusher who would be victorious by the power of God (Genesis 3:15). That is, Jesus knew his identity. What a difference that makes!

Jesus knew the Scriptures about God's power in delivering Israel from Egypt (Exodus 12-15) and therefore knew the power of God that would redeem the true Israel (Jesus himself!).

Jesus knew the Scriptures and therefore knew the power of God that prevailed throughout Israel's history over all obstacles, including apostasy, corruption, captivity. Jesus therefore believed God to powerfully overcome every onslaught that he faced.

Jesus knew the Scriptures and therefore knew the power of God that would bring him back from the dead (see Psalms 2; 110; 118:22-23).

In short, because Jesus knew the Scriptures and the power of God, he persevered to the glory of God and to the good of others. May it be so with us.

Applications

Let me draw this brief study to a close with a few comments.

First, as you face chronic suffering, the Scriptures provide you with the knowledge that a glorified body awaits you one day and God has the power to do it. This provides perspective, which makes you a blessing to those observing your faith.

Second, as you face what you believe is imminent death, the Scriptures provide you with the knowledge that Jesus will come for you and usher you home (John 14:1ff) and that God has the power to do this. This honours God and provides perspective to build the faith of others.

Third, as you face financial hardship, wondering how your need will be met, the Scriptures equip you to know the promise that God will care for you and he who owns the cattle on a thousand hills has the power to convert that into food in your cupboard. This serves as a faith builder for others.

Fourth, as you face deep heartache in ministry, the Scriptures inform you that Jesus Christ will build his church and that, because of God's power, the gates of hell will not prevail against it. As William Carey was assured by his knowledge of the Scriptures and the power of God, we can expect great things from God and therefore attempt great things for God. This provides stamina for others looking on.

Fifth, as you face the deep darkness of betrayal in a relationship, the Scriptures equip you with the knowledge of God's ability to restore that which was broken and by his power to even redeem and restore such. Peter was restored after betraying Jesus. Countless broken marriages have been healed by the power of the gospel. Close friendships have been shattered restored. What hope for others!

Sixth, as you face loneliness in old age, or perhaps in singleness or in barrenness, the Scriptures equip you with the knowledge that God really is sufficient to meet your need for companionship and he has the power to do it. This keeps you praying and encourages others to wait on the Lord.

Seventh, as you face the conviction for sinful actions and attitudes and feel a sense of despair, the Scriptures equip you with the knowledge that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. This keeps you persevering. This drives you to connect with the body, and the body is strengthened as we face the same failures – and the same grace – together.

Finally, by God's Scriptural promise of the gospel, and by his sovereign power, we are emboldened to come to the Communion Table to eat of the bread and drink of the cup, remembering Jesus until he comes again. And we know he will come again because we know the Scriptures, and therefore we know the power of God to do it.

AMEN