

Levirate Marriage

Sermon by Tim Martin. Categorized under "Wild Things of Scripture". This with other sermons can be found at www.truthinliving.org

Transcribed by Todd Williams

- Call to worship psalm 100: "a psalm for giving thanks"

100 *A Psalm of Thanksgiving. Shout to Jehovah, all the earth.*

² *Serve Jehovah with joy, come before him with singing.*

³ *Know that Jehovah He [is] God, He made us, and we are His, His people -- and the flock of His pasture.*

⁴ *Enter ye His gates with thanksgiving, His courts with praise, Give ye thanks to Him, bless ye His Name.*

⁵ *For good [is] Jehovah, to the age His kindness, And to generation and generation His faithfulness!*

- Scripture reading: John 1:11-13 (speaking of Jesus)

John 1:11-13

New International Version (NIV)

¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become **children of God— ¹³ children born not of **natural descent**, nor of **human decision** or a **husband's will**, but **born of God**.**

I have long believed that one of our greatest challenges to modern Christians is our lack of understanding of the old testament, Christians just don't spend a lot of time studying it, it is a great shame because there are great stories of gospel faith, grace, mercy and Godliness all through the old testament. I think the issue is really worse than that because we tend to miss out on those cool stories, but we tend to miss out on more than the stories in the old testament. **If Christians are not grounded in the old testament they simply won't understand what is going on in the New Testament.** This is a great tragedy of modern Christians today. We talk about the New Testament a great deal but we don't actually understand the power and the glory of what is actually going on in the New Testament. We don't understand the depth and power of what Jesus and the apostles taught because we know little of the Old Testament context from which they speak. The ultimate problem is if the New testament is cut off from the Old Testament it becomes very hollow and trite. We have these sayings we put up, "Jesus is the way the truth and the life...." "He who knows the father knows the Son...." These are very trite sayings we have placed up on our walls, clocks or some other location in our homes. But if you cut all these sayings away from the old testament you really lose a lot of the power and the glory of what we really read about in the New Testament. We will examine how that works in a little way today. But the New Testament cut off from the Old testament is limp, good for little more than trite sayings to hang on our wall.

Today we will look at some weird things found in the LAW and THE PROPHETS. These are things that very few people think about or focus on very much. Things like slavery, cities of refuge, to the slaying of the Cannites and today we will come to **the LAND of INHERITANCE and the law of LEVIRITE MARRIAGE**. I believe this is really one of those things that we have really missed out a great deal because we don't know how this law works within the Old Covenant times and we don't know how this plays a huge part in the teaching of Jesus as we will see in the gospels and the rest of the New Testament as well.

So once we understand the Old Testament practice and the theology behind the land we will look at a few places where this seemingly strange practice comes up in the New Testament. Actually we find that the Sadducees bring this law to Jesus and they use the Levirate law to test Him. So when we know what the Levirate law is and the background of the land inheritance we will actually understand better what Jesus has to say to the Sadducees who brought this as a test before Him. And we will see how the teaching of Jesus relates this directly to our Christian faith throughout the rest of the entire New Testament. But first we have to look at the background and look at the land promise of the Old Testament.

Go back to Numbers 27 and we will see how this works. There is a specific example of a man named Zelophehad who had these daughters who came to Moses:

- **27** *And daughters of Zelophehad son of Hopher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh, of the families of Manasseh son of Joseph, draw near -- and these [are] the names of his daughters, Mahlah, Noah, and Hoglah, and Milcah, and Tirzah --*

² *and stand before Moses, and before Eleazar the priest, and before the princes, and all the company, at the opening of the tent of meeting, saying:*

³ *'Our father died in the wilderness, and he -- he was not in the midst of the company who were met together against Jehovah in the company of Korah, but for his own sin he died, and had no sons;*

⁴ *why is the name of our father withdrawn from the midst of his family because he hath no son? give to us a possession in the midst of the brethren of our father;'*

⁵ *and Moses bringeth near their cause before Jehovah.*

⁶ *And Jehovah speaketh unto Moses, saying,*

⁷ *'Rightly are the daughters of Zelophehad speaking; thou dost certainly give to them a possession of an inheritance in the midst of their father's brethren, and hast caused to pass over the inheritance of their father to them.*

⁸ *'And unto the sons of Israel thou dost speak, saying, When a man dieth, and hath no son, then ye have caused his inheritance to pass over to his daughter;*

⁹ *and if he have no daughter, then ye have given his inheritance to his brethren;*

¹⁰ *and if he have no brethren, then ye have given his inheritance to his father's brethren;*

¹¹ *and if his father have no brethren, then ye have given his inheritance to his relation who is near unto him of his family, and he hath possessed it;'* and it hath been to the sons of Israel for a statute of judgment, as Jehovah hath commanded Moses.

- We see this order that was to take place with this promised land that Israel was going in to take over. Moses had just given a synthesis of Israel to divide up the entire promised land so each family of each clan would have their little piece of the promised land. They would live on that piece of promised land and enjoy God's blessings and have God's rest as a picture or type and they would pass on their inheritance from one generation to the next. And this is really how it was to be done. It was to be done by family lineage passing on the inheritance from one to the next. Now there is tremendous theology behind the land inheritance. We know from the New Testament that the promised land was a symbol of the rest we find in God's salvation. Hebrews talks about that with Joshua. [*Hebrews 4:8 for if Joshua had given them rest, He would not concerning another day have spoken after these things;*] Joshua gave them rest, but it wasn't really the rest of God ultimately that God's people had been waiting for. The true rest of God is the salvation in Jesus Christ. And we see some interesting things going on with this land promise becoming new in the New Testament and you have a lot of these different theological things play out in what's going on in the New Testament. For example you have a very significant thing going on in the book of Acts where the church in Jerusalem starts selling off the land (Acts 4:32-5:11). A lot of people do not connect that to this particular issue of the land inheritance in the old testament. What you have is the New Testament Jerusalem church beginning to sell off the land of Israel and they would bring the money to the apostles and the apostles would use it for the church. Only in the land of Israel do we see that happening, we don't see that with the Gentile churches. I believe that the theology there, is that the land was a symbol that there was coming a new time and that they were living in the new time in which the new heaven and new earth were being made and they were laying up treasures in that heaven and selling their land on earth, their promised land. They also knew that Jesus predicted that Jerusalem was going to be destroyed and there would be a property crash in Jerusalem so it wouldn't be worth anything anyway. The selling the land in Acts is connected to this particular issue of the land inheritance and have great significance in the New Testament. Most people don't see these things, so they talk about the holy land today as if the land over there in the middle east is actually still God's promised land for Israel. Here the whole statement of scripture has gone right over their heads as far as what the land was, a symbol of God's rest. A symbol or external sign of something greater to come. We as Christians tend to miss these things very terribly because we don't understand the Old Testament.

Well, here you have these daughters of Zelophehad understood that the land of inheritance was a type and it was going to work a certain way. Notice that they say their father was not a part of the rebellion of Korah. He died in the wilderness in his own sin. See, they are thinking along those terms that if you rebel against God you forfeit God's promises. We see that going on in the New Testament. Those who rebel against God do not have part in this land inheritance, do not have salvation. They are thinking along the right lines and they bring this case to Moses and say our father didn't have any sons and you are allotting this land in chapters 27 of Numbers. All this allotment is being done by the father and the heads of households you are essentially disposing our family because our dad had no son's. This is not right, so they bring their case to Moses, Eleazar the priest and the leaders of all the congregation they take it to God and God says their case is right. They cannot be disinherited from the land because they were faithful as God's people. Of course Zelophehad had died in his own sin and unbelief, but not rebellious like Korah in Korah's rebellion. This is actually one of those interesting precursors we see in the Old Testament because what we see is the inheritance could not be denied because of sex, being a female and Paul makes that clear in Galatians 3:28 that there is no male or female in Christ. Paul is not saying that everyone is the same, he is saying the promises do not work along sex lines and this is actually a precursor of that in Numbers 27. The inheritance was normally reckoned to men as head of the household but it could not be denied to these women. They too had a claim on God's inheritance so Moses gave them land as well and established the pattern of handing land from one generation to the next. And here is the key, **"it is all based on family lineage"** that is the rules in the end of Numbers 27:8-11, it was all based on family lineage. That was a very important part of the law.

Now, to get some more understanding of how this land promise works we have to go to another passage in the law. Let's look at Deuteronomy 25 where we have the introduction of the Levirate laws. The Levirate laws are actually all bound up in this land promise. It is all related in the way it works. Deuteronomy 25:5-6 ^s *When brethren dwell together, and one of them hath died, and hath no son, the wife of the dead is not without to a strange man; her husband's brother doth go in unto her, and hath taken her to him for a wife, and doth perform the duty of her husband's brother;*

⁶ *and it hath been, the first-born which she beareth doth rise for the name of his dead brother, and his name is not wiped away out of Israel.*

We look at this and think, "wow, this is weird", "your saying, if a brother dies without a son, his widow is not to marry outside the family but one of the brothers of the dead

man is to come to her, marry her and raise up seed for his brother". This is strange to us as believers today. If you put yourself in this situation----this is weird. Can you actually imagine marrying your brother's wife to raise up seed for him. I don't think any of us would think of doing this, God forbid, that one of the men in the church died. Today that would actually be polygamy and is illegal. Paul tells young widows that they should actually marry again so they won't be a burden on the church. He doesn't tell them they have to marry in their fathers line. He never tells them that. So it interesting how this widows remarrying in the New Testament comes up again but slightly different. Today this is polygamy if the brothers are already married and to take a 2nd wife. Christians just don't pay attention of this aspect of the law and the way it works. So this is the way the Levirate law works. Levirate comes from the Latin word "lever" which means brother-in-law which is why we call it Levirate. The reason this is all done is because the **inheritance in the land had to be protected**. Every family had to have their maintained inheritance in the land because of what it symbolized. If you had someone losing their inheritance in the land, it has a big symbol. They're being **blotted out from the nation of Israel**. (note: think of name erased or blotted out from the book of life-Todd Emphisis)) And we see that blotted rule of imagery being used is terms of salvation in the New Testament. It may seem strange to us to go to these kinds lengths to guarantee inheritance lines but that is the way it worked under the Old Covenant. Israelite marriage had a distinct purpose related to seed lines and inheritance. In that respect, marriage in our day is very different than Israelite marriage. But even with this distinct purpose for protecting the land inheritance, the law was still based on a honor system. It was the duty of a brother-in-law to perform his brother but no one could compel him to marry his brother's wife. Look at Deuteronomy 25:7 and following:

⁷ However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to me."⁸ Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her,"⁹ his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line."¹⁰ That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled.

This is still voluntary, that is a very big key in the law. They were told to do this but they could not make it by law that you had to marry someone. And we understand why that is because marriage is a covenant. You cannot force a covenant by compulsion. Anytime you introduce force into a covenant it is not a true covenant. You have the exchanging of vows. And of course you wouldn't want to have a marriage that it was just

by the law and no concern for covenant. Even though they were told to do this they were not forced to do it by the law. Of course if they failed in their duty, they would be dishonored, and that is what the unsandaling is. Unsandaling would be to dishonor them in the sight of all their people. So it is actually an honor system here in the way the Levirate law works. An honor system based on a free choice of the brothers and their kin. This is where we get the kinsman redeemer law as well, it is all related to this kinsmen redeemer law and the land inheritance. Now this law, as strange as this sounds to us, it becomes a very important part of the New Testament. In fact, if you don't know anything about this law, you are going to have difficulty understanding a very important teaching of Jesus. Turn to Matthew chapter 22:23–28:

That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ²⁴ "Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. ²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. ²⁶ The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. ²⁷ Finally, the woman died. ²⁸ Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?"

(Interesting text, they are using the law of God to test Jesus.)

*Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not **know the Scriptures** or **the power of God**. ³⁰ At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. ³¹ But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'^{1b1}? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."*

³³ *When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.*

You can see how this Levirate law relates to this test case brought to Jesus. Interestingly enough, we pay more attention to the test cases brought to Jesus just previous to this and pay very little attention to the test case that the Sadducees brought to Jesus.

The Sadducees used this as a hypothetical, theoretical case to test Jesus because the Sadducees denied resurrection. They believed life in the land would be everything there ever would be and there would not be a time of resurrection to come. They understood themselves as being resurrected in the land. They had life. There is no need for another resurrection to come.

This test case is their argument. Their argument goes like this: Since Moses gave no regulations of how the land inheritance would work after the resurrection came to

pass, then the concept of a future resurrection is preposterous. That is really what they are saying. Moses gave no regulations about who gets to keep whose wives and how the land inheritance works in the resurrection. Therefore, the concept of resurrection to come that the Pharisees believed is preposterous. That is their argument. They used this example as an absurdity of a coming resurrection. How could sort out the inheritance issues? How could you keep track of who keeps track of the land, whose inheritance the land is, if there is no Mosaic regulations after they are dead, buried and resurrected--it is just impossible.

Jesus responds--" *You are mistaken, not knowing the **1. Scriptures** nor **2. the power of God.** ³⁰For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God³¹ in heaven. ³¹But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, ³²'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?³³ God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." ³³And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching."*

They assumed the resurrection age would be just like their experience with a land inheritance. They assumed that inheritance rights would be conferred through human procreation.

Jesus refuted both ideas. They did not know the scriptures, because the scriptures specifically foretell a time to come that God would make a New Covenant and the Old Covenant would not be remembered anymore.

Isaiah 65 is one of the most obvious places that takes place. These were their scriptures they were suppose to know.

Isaiah 65:17 ⁷For, lo, I am creating new heavens, and a new earth, And the former things are not remembered, Nor do they ascend on the heart.

Also the famous prophecy in Jeremiah 31 of the New Covenant, where the Old Covenant won't be remembered anymore (*for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.*)

So, they did not know the scriptures. That there was coming a time that the Old Covenant was going to pass away. And also, they did not know the power of God.

This is where our scripture reading comes into play. I believe John 1 is set in the context of the land inheritance and the Levirate laws.

John 1:13 ¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

John, in the context of the Old Covenant, with that covenant context understanding, He gave them right to become children of God, not born of natural descent, but born of God.

We don't often read John's claim there in terms of the land inheritance and the Levirate laws, but I believe that is exactly the context of what John is saying.

Back to Matthew 22. On both counts ("*You are mistaken, not knowing* **1. Scriptures** nor **2. the power of God**".) the Sadducees were wrong.

Now you might ask me how this passage squares with what I believe with my covenant view of the fulfillment of all prophecy in the first century. I believe **they** lived in the **age of the law and the prophets** (represented by the physical temple) and we live in what was called "**the age to come**". Jesus continuously talked about "the age to come". He contrasted to the "age that is now" to "the age to come". I believe we live in that "age to come" (remember the age to come would not be represented by the physical temple). I believe one of the aspects of that age to come, it would a time within the resurrection that we are living in now. We don't look forward to a future resurrection. The resurrection took place in the first century.

You might take a look at the passage in Matthew 22 and say, "how can you believe that, because Jesus says, '*At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven*'"?

We look around today and we see people getting married all the time, so how can we live in this period of time when marriage is normal to us? Isn't Jesus talking about sometime at the end of the world in the resurrection when people become like angels and don't procreate? I will point out Jesus does not say they will not have children. He says they will not marry or be given in marriage at the resurrection. Doesn't that prove that resurrection is yet to come at the end of the world. And I have seen people quote this to refute people like me who believe that resurrection has already taken place.

The problem we have in understanding Jesus is the whole discussion revolves around the inheritance rights by physical procreation. Jesus statement about marriage and given in marriage refers to the passing on of God's inheritance in the New Covenant. No longer would physical lineage be of any importance in receiving God's true inheritance, what we call eternal life.

The Sadducees believed that inheritance would always be conferred through marriage. You always had to have a woman to maintain your line. And that is why in Jewish thinking your Jewishness comes through your mother. The idea here of these seven men in Matthew 22:25 is that someone is going to be disinherited because only one of them is going to get the wife. You had to have a woman and you had to be married in order to maintain your inheritance.

What do we see in the New Testament, we see John making it absolutely clear in John 1:12 He gave the right to **become children of God**— ¹³ *children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

We see this going on all through the New Testament. We see the apostle Paul calling Timothy his son. Paul has a son apart from being married. Titus, another one of Paul's sons. Onesimus, another one of Paul's son's. He didn't get married to have those son's. He is having children though. We see that all through the New Testament.

How many New Covenant children does Paul have? All the churches he plants he refers to as his New Covenant children.

1 Corinthians 4:14-15 *"I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as **my dear children**. ¹⁵ Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for **in Christ Jesus I became your father** through the gospel."*

Was Paul married to do that? No, he was not married to do that.

1 Corinthians 4:16

¹⁶ *Therefore I urge you to imitate me. ¹⁷ For this reason I have sent to you **Timothy, my son** whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.*

Notice that Paul is having children **but not through marriage**.

We see the same thing in John's letters. 3John 4 – *"I have no greater joy than to hear that **my children** are walking in the truth."*

All those that John is writing to are his children apart from marriage.

Now to see the full picture here how this Levirate law relates to the New Testament and its transition to the New Covenant we need to go through the parallel passage of Matthew 22 in Luke 20:27-38. Luke gives us much more information. Matthew is a bare bones outline. Luke gives us much more information. Luke gives us a lot more of what Jesus response to the Sadducees were and it becomes very clear how this Levirate law works.

Luke 20:27-35

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection [**resurrection is the context**], came to Jesus with a question.²⁸ "Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.²⁹ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless.³⁰ The second³¹ and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children.³² Finally, the woman died too.³³ Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

³⁴ Jesus replied, "The people of **this age [the age represented by the temple my emphasis]** marry and are given in marriage.³⁵ But those who are considered worthy of taking part in **the age to come [New Covenant age my emphasis]** and **in the resurrection from the dead** will neither marry nor be given in marriage

The idea here is:

1. **"This age"** refers to the Old Covenant age of what Jesus was a part of was the last days of what we see all through the New Testament.

(Galatians 4:4-"But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, **born** of a woman, **born under the law**"), which was the Mosaic age.

2. **"That age" is the age to come** was the New Covenant inaugurated by Christ's resurrection and finally and fully established at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70

Continue in vs 36 of Luke 20: ³⁶" and **they can no longer die**; for they are **like the angels**. They are **God's children**, since they are **children of the resurrection**."

And then Jesus goes on to give the account of the burning bush.

That language of being God's children and being children of the resurrection is all bound up together. If we are God's children by faithfulness, which the apostles taught all through the New Testament, **then we are children of the resurrection**.

The resurrection is not something for our future out there. It is the basis on which all the promises of God stand. Everything about being God's child stands on the resurrection. It begins with Christ resurrection and the resurrection of Israel at the end of that age.

Can you see why it is so important that resurrection is something that took place back then rather than something we wait for at 'supposedly' at the end of the world. To be God's children we must be children of the resurrection. The whole discussion of Levirate marriage relates to death. And it is kind of depressing to think about this in terms of the Old Covenant because they were so entrenched in the physical land with physical promises that death was really the end. That is really what both the Pharisees and Sadducees believed. The reason they found Jesus so controversial is that He challenged all their Old Covenant physical expectations. Here is challenges their mere physical definition of death.

Jesus says, "they (that would be us, Christians son's of God, son's of the resurrection) **they can no longer die**". Think of the power of that statement, **"THEY CAN NO LONGER DIE"**.

Jesus taught this all through His ministry. And this is what really sent the leaders over the edge, they picked up stones to stone Him right after He said this.

*John 8:48-51 The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"⁴⁹ Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me."⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge.⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, **he will never see death.**" The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham **died, as did the prophets**, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.'⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?*

In **John 11:25-26** "***I am the resurrection and the life.***^[d] *Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,*²⁶ and ***everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.***

Yes, our physical biological bodies die but you will never die. That is what the resurrection is. Christians miss this because they are waiting for the graves to open and somebody to pop out

Were stuck like the Pharisees and the Sadducees looking at the physical things. Has not Christian theology always maintained that Jesus triumphed over death through Christ's resurrection?

All those who believe join Him in His victory by being raised to newness of life in the gospel. Our eternal life begins **now**, in this life when you believe Christ, **the resurrection takes place for a believer**

this Levirate marriage issue becomes a huge theme in the New Testament. The contrast between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant could not be made more manifest than by looking at the Levirate marriage law.

I want to conclude by looking at one more application of New Covenant resurrection life of having children. The kingdom of God grows by its citizens having children. It's really all about having kids. We see that with Paul and John and all the writers in the New Testament and their children. They were very fruitful in the kingdom and we have a high view of children as well in this congregation and that is a good thing. But make sure your definition of having children is not limited to an Old Covenant Levirate concern for merely physical birth. We are called not only to have children in the flesh but we are also called to have children in the spirit. Just as Paul, John and all the other apostles. So make sure you transmit biological life to your children but resurrection life as well. Don't limit it to physical things, don't limit it to the physical lineage, because when you do that, as soon as you do that you are back into the Old Covenant. And here is the glory of the New Covenant in that respect, everything you do in the kingdom, apart from marriage, you don't have to get married to do this. That is Jesus' point. Everything you do in the kingdom, every time you serve someone else and help them along into the kingdom and their understanding no matter how your position is, you are having children. You can have kids until you physically die on this earth. You can have as many kids as you

want. That is what the New Covenant does. It opens up our understanding of these things. We can be used of God to bring God's children into the kingdom all of our lives. For everyone we stir up to kingdom living is another one of God's children born through the spirit in us. We can bear New Covenant children to the end of our days here on earth and that is the power of the resurrection. That is the power of what has come as a result of the resurrection. It is all about having kids to enlarge God's eternal family and that is our calling in the kingdom of God.

Let us pray.....