

*You Pick The Sermon: Will We See and Know Our Loved Ones In Heaven?*

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*Deuteronomy 32:45-50; Matthew 17:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8*

Friends, our final Scripture reading this evening comes from 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. Let's listen to the Word of God. "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

The fantastic thing about the "You Pick The Sermon" series is that we get to hit topics that wouldn't come up otherwise. There are some things that the Bible doesn't address directly. Tonight's topic is one of them. The question – "will we see and know our loved ones in heaven?" – is great because a lot of us have that in the back of our minds. We've never read a Bible verse addressing it, and we've probably not heard about it in a sermon. But it matters to all of us. What good are our relationships with our family and friends now if they are all meaningless in eternity? Is God good if we can't recognize each other? If we're spirits for a time and then resurrected into new bodies, how will we know who's who? All good questions. We're going to address those from Scripture tonight, and it's my hope that we will leave here comforted by what we learn.

Before we piece together evidence from the Bible, I want to tackle why the Bible doesn't take on this question directly. The biggest reason why is because the way people thought about themselves in relationship with others was different, but in a subtle way that they didn't even think about. It's just like no one in America ever thinks about why we drive on the right hand side of the road. We just do. We've seen it to be true from the time we were babies until we got behind the wheel ourselves. It's only when we go to someplace like Great Britain that we question it. This was not a big question to be addressed in the Bible because once they understood God's plan for eternity, they understand that we would be in community.

Now in America, everything is individualistic. Everything is tailored to us, from our homes to our electronics. Our natural response to things is from an individualistic point of view, and this is true of our relationships. The law doesn't hold us responsible for our relatives, and very few people feel a sense of obligation to their immediate families, let alone cousins or distant relations. Even if you like them and hang out with them, you aren't obligated to them – unless you were raised in a family that valued a different cultural mindset. American individualism extends even to our relationship with God – me and Jesus. Many people believe that they can follow Jesus without being a part of a church. Because of that mindset, we worry that we won't know or recognize anyone in heaven because we take our lack of commitment to community and impose it on our idea of what God's Kingdom will be like.

But God doesn't work like that. Because God is one but also three simultaneously, in His very nature He is in relationship with Himself – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other. When God revealed His plans for eternal life, He revealed them to individuals, but individuals within a communal society in the midst of communal societies. God works through communities. He saved Noah's family. He made promises to Abraham to make his family the means by which He would make Himself known to the world. He worked through Jacob's sons, creating the twelve tribes of Israel. God saved a people out of Egypt. He keeps those people together as His community of faith. The ancients lived in community and expected God to save them as a community of faith. We believe because somebody who was somehow a part of Christian community reached out to us.

As believers, we are addressed as family members in a society of kinship. In Luke 6, Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High." In Romans 8, Paul writes, "We wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." God comforts those coming out of paganism in 2 Corinthians 6, revealing, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

We are part of a family. While we are saved individually and we individually must have faith in Christ, we *together* are the church of Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12, we're warned we *need* each other. Believers *together* are God's children. The word "church" in Greek literally means "the gathering" or "the gathered ones." And even when we are alone, God has given us the Holy Spirit, the comforter, as a permanent companion to guard our hearts and guide us.

It makes no sense that God, who has worked through families, who has made Himself known in communities, who calls us to gather together, who gives us the Holy Spirit so we're not alone even when we're alone, would suddenly change how He does things when we get to eternity. People from every tribe, tongue, and nation will come together to worship God in eternity, together! There will be vast numbers of people there. We will be together. Yet we also believe that we will know one another.

But we won't just look at the differences in society to show that God will bring us together in a recognizable way in eternity – we can find support in Scripture. One surprising source is the death of Moses, and then Moses' appearance during Jesus' earthly ministry. In Deuteronomy, after Moses has addressed the people, God says to him, "There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people." There are two verbs God uses – "die" and "be gathered to your people." In other passages, these are combined with a third verb, "buried."

There's no euphemism here. We hate to say that someone died. It sounds too final, so we use a gentler phrase like "passed away." (That saying was coined by the cult leader Mary Baker Eddy, by the way, not by any Christian.) But Scripture is blunt. People die. It's the consequence of sin, so it's got to be blunt. But "gathered to his people" isn't a replacement phrase. It says something different.

Moses' body wasn't literally "gathered to his people." Deuteronomy 34 says that God "buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-Peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day." Moses was not in an ancestral burial site. Yet God says he was gathered to his people. It's said about many who die in the Old Testament. After death, God brings us together with others who have died before us. While God revealed little to the ancient Jews about life after death, God gave them hope that they would be with their families, their people.

We move forward 1,400 years. Jesus takes His three closest disciples with Him up on a mountainside. Suddenly, He is transfigured – the glory of His divinity shines through. His eternal majesty and power are on display. In the midst of it all, Moses and Elijah show up, talking to Jesus. And Peter knows who Moses is! He's never seen Moses. There's no description of how Moses looked. But Peter knows both Moses and Elijah on sight! He offers to set up tents for them by name! They are more recognizable now than they were in life!

Then there's Jesus Himself, who is not just a spirit like Moses and Elijah but fully embodied with a resurrection body after His death. In tonight's passage from 1 Corinthians 15, Paul gives a running tally of all the people that see Jesus after His death. Peter. The other close disciples. 500 followers all at once. Then James, Jesus' brother. Then to more apostles – we don't even know how many. Then finally to Paul. Jesus gets around!

And Jesus is recognizable as Himself. The women at the tomb recognize Him. Mary Magdalene recognizes Him. Even Thomas, the doubter, recognizes Jesus because He still carries the wounds from the crucifixion. They all know who He is. And in Acts 1, when Jesus ascends into heaven, the disciples are told by angels that He will return the same recognizable way.

What makes it confusing is that Jesus can choose not to be recognizable. The disciples traveling on the road to Emmaus don't know who He is, even though they travel with Him for hours. The disciples aren't completely sure it's Jesus on the seashore calling to them to put out their nets. But in both situations, He is fully revealed to them when He breaks bread with them, when the Last Supper is in a sense reenacted before them. Jesus chooses when to make Himself known, and it's through the bread and the cup. When Jesus wants to be known, He's known.

The promise of being recognized and known as unique individuals who are part of a community is true for all believers. Talking about the perfection of eternity in 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul commented, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

We will know Jesus and know others fully, and we will be known by them fully. In fact, we'll recognize that what we are now is just a poor reflection of all God intended us to be. Once we are with the LORD, we will be recognizable, whether as spirits first before the resurrection or embodied as we will be eternally once Jesus finally returns. We will not look exactly like we do now, but we will be more ourselves and more recognizable than we ever have been. We can take comfort in the thought that we will see our loved ones and know them better than we ever could now.

We're going to switch gears and talk about the one place we see people alive after death. It's in a parable Jesus tells about a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. The rich man ignored Lazarus while living in luxury in life, and he winds up in hell; Lazarus, meanwhile, is comforted in heaven. Because it's a parable, it is a story; it isn't meant to tell us what life after death is precisely like. As the story continues, we learn that the parable is really about the fact that if we won't listen to Scripture, nothing else will convince us to follow God and turn from evil, even people rising from the dead!

But the details in the parable are fascinating. First, everyone is recognizable in the afterlife. Second, there is some communication possible even between those who are saved and those who are not, but there is a great chasm between them and no one can travel between the realms of heaven and hell. And finally, we are in death who we were in life, only even more fully and clearly. The rich man, even while he is suffering in torment because of his callous disregard for God and for others, is still trying to get Lazarus to be his slave in the afterlife. He is concerned for the salvation of his brothers so they can avoid the torment of hell, but his thought is still to send Lazarus, to make Lazarus work for him, even after he neglected him in this life. He might be punished, but he hasn't learned a thing.

This gets to a part of this question we're afraid to ask. How can eternity be wonderful if we know our loved ones are suffering, and how can God be good if He would send someone to hell? It's a fair question that theologians have wrestled with over the ages.

The thing we know beyond a shadow of a doubt is that God is good. Even in condemning some to spend eternity outside of His presence, God is good. How? Because God is just. He will not let evil left unpunished. Being just is part of being good. Now, there are two options. Either the punishment for evil deeds will have been laid on Jesus on the cross because of faith and belief, or the punishment will be on the unbeliever in eternity. And you know what? Even unbelievers will agree on that day that their punishment is just, even if they hate it. They will have rejected the gift that Jesus offered them of paying for their sins.

Philippians 2:9-11 says because Jesus was obedient to the Father even unto death on a cross, "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Every person who ever lived, whether saved or unsaved, believer or unbeliever, will know the truth. Not every person will call Jesus Savior, but every person will call Him Lord. In eternity, we will get the full picture and understand it.

Right now, we have only the faintest idea of God's justice and holiness and grace. We sympathize with sin because we have no concept of how enormous sin and its consequences are. Author C.S. Lewis said that we have too low a view of sin and too weak a desire for heaven. When we arrive in eternity and the veils are torn away, when we see people for who they really are, when we are really ourselves, Lewis writes, "the dullest and the most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature, which if you saw it now you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you meet if it all only in a nightmare...there are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal."

We will agree with God even if some of those we knew and loved are on the wrong side of the chasm. We cannot fully understand it now, but we will then. In Revelation 21, God wipes away every tear from our eyes; in eternity, there will be no more sorrow or mourning or pain for the faithful. We will not continue to grieve those who did not believe forever. They will have made their choice – and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man shows that their fundamental sinfulness and rejection of God doesn't change just because they know the truth.

Rather than dwell on the difficulty of this, it's better for us to dwell on what we can do about it. We have the privilege of being God's messengers and ambassadors. There are folks that only we can reach with the good news...the good news that Jesus provides hope and salvation and a new way to live. There are some God has set up for me to reach, and some God has set up for you to reach. You know them and have relationships with them. I know that I don't want to get to heaven and find out that someone might have heard the gospel and believed it if I wasn't such a coward about it. God has given us an incredible opportunity. We can't make someone believe, but through us they may come to believe and gain eternal life.

If we are concerned about our family and friends and loved ones, we have the privilege of introducing them to Christ. It's not a job or a duty or an obligation; it's a privilege. You know, when I used to write film reviews, occasionally I'd get a thank you note from somebody who'd been introduced to their new favorite movie because of what I'd written. It made me feel great. It was a privilege to do that. And this is an introduction to the creator of the universe here!

We'll look at this more in a few weeks, but we don't have to come across as mean or crazy or strange. Folks might think that about our beliefs, but throughout history, people have begun to trust Christians and believe in Christ because Christians cared for them and loved them. Especially with those we care about, we are setting foundations for these conversations when we treat them with kindness and love and grace, especially when they are difficult to love. Then our words about Jesus will take on real meaning. And by God's grace, we will not have to worry about where or how we will see them after death. We will know.

Next week, we're going to talk more about what is to come as we discuss our next You Pick The Sermon topic – how the books of Genesis and Revelation are linked. While God has not revealed a great deal about our future beyond this life, we know that if we come to Him confessing our sins and trusting in Jesus' redemption, turning to His way of life, we will see Him in glory, alongside all who have believed. We will rejoice together in the goodness of God. And if we have any doubts about who we might see there, we have an occasion to reach out with the plan of redemption to them too.