

WILL WE KNOW EACH OTHER IN HEAVEN?

This is the question I am asked more than any other when the subject of life after death comes up. The affirmative answer that I give brings such comfort and hope to the questioner! I am glad to be the bearer of good news, good news that I truly believe and that has comforted me more than I could possibly tell.

Of course, I have God's faith family in mind when I think of those we will know in Heaven. And just how much faith is required and how it is to be manifested is up to God, not to us. God alone knows a person's heart and God's ways and thoughts are higher than ours, fortunately! I say that because I know how much my understanding of God's mercy and grace has broadened through the years, and I wouldn't be surprised if further stretching is still to come.

In this essay I will try to record why I believe we will recognize others in our Heavenly Home. I am eager to begin. Consider these things with me. And may your conclusion bring you as much joy as mine does to me.

My favorite story on this subject is the transfiguration of Jesus, recorded in Matthew 17, Mark 9 and Luke 9. Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them up a high mountain because he wanted to pray there. As he was praying, Jesus was transfigured before their eyes: his face changed and his clothing became dazzling white. Suddenly ("just then") Moses and Elijah appeared *"in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus about his departure which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem"* (Luke). The disciples recognized the men and were astonished! Frightened, too. Peter began to describe a plan to keep the two visitors there on the mountain with Jesus when God cut him short with an announcement from the clouds. He said, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."* And just as suddenly Moses and Elijah were gone; only Jesus was with them.

How I love this story, which yields so much truth to me. Moses had died maybe 1,400 years before this incident, and Elijah was bodily removed from the earth in a chariot of fire and a whirlwind hundreds of years later. Certainly they could not have known each other on earth, not even from pictures. But they were together in Heaven when God chose the two of them to perform a special service: go to visit Jesus and talk with him about the crucifixion he was soon to undergo. Surely the two were not meeting for the first time as they carried out their assignment. They must have traveled together as friends as they moved from Heaven to earth and back. I love to think of them meeting as soon as Elijah arrived in that chariot of fire.

I like, too, the truth that we keep our identities in heaven. There is no such thing as reincarnation! Moses and Elijah are still themselves now just as they were in the time of Jesus and always will be. The Old Testament ends with an interesting prophecy:

"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:6,7).

The disciples asked Jesus why the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first. Jesus said, *"Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished.... Then THE DISCIPLES UNDERSTOOD THAT HE WAS TALKING TO THEM ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST"* (Matthew 17:12,13, emphasis mine). John was not a new embodiment of

Elijah as shown by the fact that Elijah was still himself at the transfiguration, which was after John's death. There were elements, though, of John's personality, appearance and mission that were reminiscent of the great prophet Elijah.

Jesus gave a further example of keeping our identities when he said in Luke 20:37,38: *"In the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."* What would be the point of mentioning that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still alive other than to let us know that some day we will be there with them and know them? I'm so glad that death will not eradicate my being, but enhance it. I have never been anyone other than myself and I will always be who I am now, just like the ones we have been talking about.

That leads us to another question: How did Peter, James and John know who the two men with Jesus were? Before I attempt to answer that one, I must tell you about two experiences from my past ...

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My Aunt Sarah Kiebach, my mother's sister, was a very important person in my life during my growing-up years, especially where spiritual matters were concerned. She had a vibrant faith and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; she also openly read her Bible, preparing for the Sunday School lessons that she faithfully taught in church. My contact with Aunt Sarah was limited as she lived in Philadelphia, PA and I was a hundred miles west in my childhood, and then three hours north in Yorktown Heights, NY after 1960. We had ways of keeping in touch, though, and our times together were a blessing.

Aunt Sarah died in 1970, and I attended her funeral. I knew that she was happy and well in Heaven, that only her body was lying in the coffin. Back in New York, I had an odd sensation several times: I felt that Aunt Sarah was closer to me than when she was in Philadelphia and I in Yorktown. Who knows where Heaven is located? We usually think of it as up beyond the clouds because Jesus and Elijah ascended. But Heaven is most of all a different realm. It really could be nearer than we think.

One day several years later, while I was alone in the house, a visitor suddenly entered and stood near me in the dining room. "Aunt Sarah!" I exclaimed. Yes, it was Aunt Sarah, no doubt about it. What did she do? She came, she smiled at me and then she left. Certainly I saw nothing with my physical eyes. What I did "see" was my aunt's smile, at the height where her smile would have been. There was no body and I was glad, because I knew her body was in Grandview Cemetery awaiting the Resurrection. The whole incident was a very happy one, not frightening at all. I felt like we had visited for hours, though it was over in a few seconds. It was a taste of eternity!

Why did God send Aunt Sarah to my house that day? Perhaps it was to enhance my already strong belief in Heaven and to add confidence when I taught about life after death. Equally important, it served as a validating backdrop for a second incident years later.

During the 1970s I did a lot of volunteer work in the Field Home, a nearby residence for 37 old ladies. One of my jobs was to be a "friendly visitor" for Miss Redlefsen, a stately German woman who was now wheelchair-bound. It was my duty to spend an hour with her every week, if possible. Behind all my work with the Field Home residents was a desire to introduce them to my God and to my Savior, Jesus Christ. Miss Redlefsen would not participate in any kind of religious conversation. Her reticence was so strong that I never heard her say the words God, Lord or Jesus. She certainly would not discuss the Bible, nor would she attend religious services at the Home. The best I could do was leave some literature with her and hope that she would read it privately.

In the fall of 1979 I told Miss Redlefsen that I had made arrangements to teach a weekly Bible class at Field Home beginning in January. Imagine my joy when she said, "If you teach it, I will come"! But just before Thanksgiving I got a call with the news that my friend was in the hospital and if I wanted to see her, I had better go right away. I went and was warmly received. Oh, how I wanted to talk about Jesus and Heaven, but I just couldn't. Sadly, I turned away from her to leave. As I was about to exit the room, Miss Redlefsen called to me and said, "Now don't you worry about me. I'm in the Lord's hands." Her stunning words gave me hope. Was she a believer after all? Would she be going to Heaven when she died? A few days later, she was gone and my questions remained unanswered.

In January, 1980 I was alone in the house, resting on a cot in our study, when it happened again: suddenly I had a visitor! "Miss Redlefsen!" I exclaimed, for that is who it was. Her visit was exactly like Aunt Sarah's: she came, she smiled and then she left. Interestingly, her smile was the height she was when standing, not when seated in her wheelchair. Now I knew: Miss Redlefsen was in Heaven! But why was she sent to visit me? I believe she was sent to deliver a message. God was saying to me, "Don't bother trying to figure out who belongs to me and who doesn't. You teach my word; you present the gospel and let the rest up to me." I've tried to do that since then. How freeing!

So that is another reason I believe that we will know each other in Heaven: I saw two who live there and I knew them. My experiences were similar in some ways to those of Peter, James and John at the transfiguration, only they exclaimed, "Moses! Elijah!" The eternal moments that we sometimes have here let us know that our thinking will be different in Heaven. There we will simply know, even as we are known. Won't that be wonderful?

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One of my favorite Bible passages concerns the return of Jesus to take us to be with him forever. This passage, 1 Thessalonians 4:13 and following, also includes teaching that informs my belief that we will know one another in Heaven. Paul and Silas, as traveling missionaries, visited Thessalonica on one of their trips. Acts 17:2-4 tells us what happened:

As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

Some of the unbelieving Jews became jealous of Paul's success, however, and caused so much trouble that during the night the believers sent the missionaries to another town. It is evident that Paul, during his short stay, had taught the Thessalonian believers that Jesus was going to come back and take the believers to Heaven with him. They must have expected this to happen very soon, which was fine with them. But then some of their company died and that filled them with both grief and questions. They were able to get their questions to Paul, who wrote them a letter in reply. Here is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18:

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who sleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

The word I love in Paul's reply is "together." Basically what Paul told the Thessalonian believers is that they don't have to worry about those of their number who have died. They are safe with Jesus and will return with him when he comes back. When that event takes place, two things will happen at the same time: those who have died will receive their resurrection bodies and we who are still alive at the time will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51,52). At that point we will all have resurrection bodies, capable of ascending through the air. And that is exactly what we will do: together with those who have died. The Thessalonians had in mind people they had known. Paul is telling them that in the resurrection state, they will still know their loved ones and be with them in the presence of the Lord. This was meant to encourage them and temper their grief. It works for me!

In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul goes on to say we shouldn't try to figure out just when Jesus will return. Instead we should behave as people with this hope. And then he adds:

[Our Lord Jesus Christ] died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing (5:10,11).

This passage says to me that a sort of togetherness exists even now between those on earth and those in Heaven. We are all with Jesus and in him all are alive. What a delightful thought to ponder! Let's build each other up with these truths.

Some people are concerned about whether we might miss those who are not in Heaven. I know of no Bible story or passage nor any anecdotes that address this issue. I am content to leave that question with God and rejoice in what I do know:

God's family reunion is coming and we will certainly know the others who are there!

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A few days before he died, my friend Bud broke into a smile and, looking toward the foot of his hospital bed, said, "Ken! What are you doing here?" His wife, who related the story to me, saw nothing and wondered what it was that reminded Bud of Ken, their longtime friend who had died within the previous year. I have heard and read of so many similar stories that I have no doubt about what had happened: God had sent Ken to visit Bud and help him get ready for his journey Home.

"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" (1 Corinthians 13:12). One of the distressing signs of ageing is the fading recollection of names and faces. Even at our best we do not come close to the abilities we will have in Heaven. There we will be face to face with our Lord, true, but also with others. Surely we will know their names – and more. Now we are known so well that even the hairs of our heads are all numbered. And when we know as fully as we are known – wow! I cannot imagine what that will be like.

Last night (January 2, 2005) I went to bed not knowing how I would end this essay. I had just completed the section about rising to meet the Lord together. A few thoughts remained, but I still needed a conclusion. In the middle of the night I woke up with a song running through my head. I listened, and found it was part of Handel's Messiah. Continuing to listen, I caught the word "together," and then I knew: God had given me my conclusion! I also knew why I had such a desire years ago to sing Handel's composition that I joined a community choir in order to have that privilege. God knew I would need the words and the tune for this essay!

Often during my Bible teaching and preaching years I would go to bed not knowing how I would finish a sermon or talk. Almost always I had far too much material and needed some way to make a section of it cohesive. What I did know was that somehow during my sleep the Lord would finish the work for me. I would either wake up during the night with the idea I needed or it would come to me first thing in the morning during my mulching time (the hour or so I spend musing while lazing, trying to wake up enough to get out of bed). Some of my most creative thoughts, music and poetry arrived in this manner also.

God is so amazing! If there is anything in my teachings, music or writings that is of value in God's kingdom, it is because God has been heavily involved in producing it. I have been a channel through which his creative, fresh, "different" ideas flowed, merely a vessel for his use. I have enjoyed the experience (still do!), but:

To God be the glory!

I looked up the verse I was hearing and found Isaiah 40:5, which refers to the future:

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Will we know each other in Heaven? Yes! But our focus, together, will be on our glorious Lord, who is worthy of our eternal praise and devotion. Amen.

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Verna Kwiatkowski

www.vernakwiatkowski.com