
When we speak of future recognition, some skeptic will usually ask, “Would you be happy in heaven knowing some of your friends were not there?” Instead of helping our problem, this question increases it. If I cannot recognize any of my loved ones in heaven, then I would be forever uncertain if any of them made it there! Furthermore, this question assumes I would want to overlook the manner of life these people led while alive. If they are lost, it will be because they did not desire heaven enough to quit the practice of sin. Yes, we will be saddened by the loss of some, but I always thought this is why “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4).

Another objection sometimes raised is based on Matthew 22:30. There, Jesus tells us that in the resurrection, we will neither marry nor be given in marriage but will be like the angels of heaven. But, this passage proves our point. The angels of heaven surely know and recognize each other. We will not have a physical marriage there, for we will be married to the Lamb of God (Rev 19:7).

Our Present Hope

The first child from David and Bathsheba’s union died after a week of suffering (2 Sam 12:15–23). Grief-stricken David, with his child yet unburied, said, “Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.” What comfort could David have of being with his child again if he could not distinguish his child from mine?

After the final judgment, I fully expect to “see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:28). I shall see them in the same way I shall

see Jesus (1 John 3:2) and His Father (Rev 22:4). The same Greek word for “see” is used in all three verses.

Congregations often sing the beautiful song, “*Shall We Gather At The River*.” In it, we bid our brothers and sisters in Christ look for us on the margin of the river of life when our earthly journey is completed. We will “gather with the saints at the river, that flows by the throne of God” (cf. Rev 22:1).

Earthly ties cannot last forever. Knowing we shall recognize one another in heaven, let us labor diligently to increase our acquaintances in that glorious abode of the soul. And as another song suggests, *“If we never meet again this side of heaven, As we struggle through this world and its strife, There’s another meeting place somewhere in heaven, By the side of the river of life.”* 

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“Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people” (Genesis 25:8–9)

Will We Recognize Each Other In Heaven?



David Padfield

Will We Recognize Each Other In Heaven?

Who among us has not pondered the great question, “Will I recognize my friends in heaven?” While the Bible does not directly ask this question, the human heart does. In death’s dark hour, can I comfort the relatives of those who “died in the Lord” with the hope of a future reunion in heaven? Or, when the undertaker closes the casket, is this truly the hour of final departure? It appears as though the scriptures assume we will know and recognize one another in heaven.

The great patriarch Abraham died at the age of 175. Moses records his death with these words: “Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was *gathered to his people*. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah...” (Gen 25:8–9). Notice the sequence: he died, was gathered to his people, then his body was buried in the cave. Though the tomb was new, somehow Abraham was now with his people.

This phrase, “gathered to his people,” is found recorded at the death of many Old Testament worthies, such as:

- ◆ Ishmael (Gen 25:17)
- ◆ Isaac (Gen 35:29)
- ◆ Jacob (Gen 49:33)
- ◆ Aaron (Num 20:24)
- ◆ Moses (Deut 32:50)
- ◆ Josiah (2 Kgs 22:20)

Moses’s destiny is further described in Deuteronomy 31:16 when God said, “Behold, you will rest with your fathers.” This could

not refer to his physical body, for it was buried “in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor” (Deut 34:6).

Not only do we read of individuals being “gathered” to their people, but after the death of Joshua, we find an entire “generation had been gathered to their fathers” (Judges 2:10).

“Gathered” Defined

What does it mean to be gathered to your people? The word “gathered” in these passages is defined as “to be collected, gathered together ... used of entering into Hades, where the Hebrews regarded their ancestors as being gathered together. This gathering to one’s fathers, or one’s people is distinguished both from death and burial” (*Gesenius’ Hebrew And Chaldee Lexicon*).

William Wilson commented, “To be gathered to his fathers, is a peculiar phrase deserving notice; it is distinguished from death which precedes, and from burial of the body which follows: Gen. xxv.8; xxxv.29; 2 Kings xxii.20. It seems to denote the being received by his own people, or among them. We read in the N.T. of being received into Abraham’s bosom, or of sitting down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven, as at a feast; so that to be gathered to his own people, is to be with them in joy or torment in Hades” (*Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*).

Abraham has been “gathered to his people” until that day when his dust shall live again at the sound of the last trumpet, and

all the buried dead shall hear the voice of the Son of Man. When Isaac and Ishmael were “gathered to their people,” did they recognize their own father, Abraham? It would be foolish to deny they did.

It was a source of comfort when the prophetess Huldah told Josiah he would be “gathered to his fathers” (2 Kgs 22:20). But, what comfort would there be if he could not recognize his “fathers”? Was he to dwell in eternity, among his own family, as a total stranger?

In 1 Samuel 28, we find the account of Saul and the woman at Endor. This woman earned her living as a medium, one who conducts seances. It is not our purpose here to discuss how she obtained these powers, or even if they were real. During her seance with the king, Samuel the prophet appeared and rebuked Saul. He said, “Moreover the Lord will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow *you and your sons will be with me*.” This passage does not simply refer to physical death. It teaches that Saul and his sons would be in Hades, the unseen abode of departed spirits. And, he would be there *with* Samuel.

Objections Considered

While considering the objections raised to the doctrine of future recognition, I am reminded of the words of brother Moses Lard, a well-known gospel preacher of the past century, “We have no sympathy with that infernal delusion called *soul sleeping*. Neither have we respect enough for it to attempt its refutation. We speak for the comfort of good men, not the refutation of bad ones. Still in passing we may jot down a thought or two” (*Lard’s Quarterly*, April 1865). Here are a few thoughts for your consideration:
