

QUESTION:

What does the Bible say about knowing our family and friends in heaven? Will we recognize them?

ANSWER:

The Bible does not speak specifically to this question. It seems to me, however, that some inferences may be drawn from what the Bible does say about heaven so that an answer may be formulated. Reasoning from several passages of Scripture we may conclude that we shall know and recognize loved ones in heaven.

First, an inference may be drawn from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 about *identifying* loved ones in heaven. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes to specifically comfort them of the fact of the resurrection of believers, particularly those who are already dead. He says, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep [i.e., dead], so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (1 Thess. 4:13-14). Here Paul is saying that Christians who are already dead will accompany Jesus at his second coming. Paul’s point is that the Thessalonians need not grieve for deceased believers for they have the hope of resurrection (see 1 Thess. 4:13, 16-17) even as believers who are alive when Christ returns. Paul in fact says in v.18 to “comfort one another with these words.”

Although this text is certainly not about the identity of believers at Christ’s return, it would seem strange that these words could be comforting if in fact no one would know who these believers are who return with Christ. The comfort which Paul refers to is certainly the hope of resurrection; but by implication it seems to me that comfort is also *knowing* who these resurrected believers are.

Second, we may draw an inference about *remembering* loved ones in heaven from Revelation 6:9-11. In this text, the Apostle John sees a vision of Christian martyrs under an altar in heaven. These martyrs cry out for justice, asking how long God will refrain from avenging their blood (v.10). This implies that these martyrs remembered what occurred to them while on earth, i.e., they were martyred for their faith. If this is the case, then it seems that people in heaven can surely remember loved ones.

Third, a peculiar thing occurs at Jesus’ transfiguration. When Jesus went up on the mountain, he took Peter, James, and John with him. While they were there, Elijah and Moses appeared, talking with Jesus. Peter then said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Mark 9:5). It is interesting to note that Peter seems to know exactly who Moses and Elijah are. How does Peter know them? We cannot say for sure, but what is relevant to the current discussion is that Moses and Elijah are *recognizable*. If Peter is able to recognize them (however that came to be), surely others are able to recognize them. By implication, loved ones will continue to be recognizable in heaven as well.

We should note, however, that the *kind* of relationships we have with loved ones will be different in heaven. For example, although we may recognize and know our spouse, we will no longer be married. In Jesus’ discussion with the Sadducees in Matthew 22:30, he mentions that humans

“neither marry nor are given in marriage” in heaven. The part of the marriage vow “until death do us part” really is to be taken literally.

In conclusion, it seems to me that Christians will know and recognize their loved ones in heaven. Exactly how this will occur or be made possible is unknown. But if heaven is a place of glory of which the Bible speaks, I believe that the glory would include knowing and recognizing loved ones.