

Will We Recognize Our Loved Ones in Heaven?

In [Blog](#) by [Cameron Joyner](#)

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Whenever I pass through the historical accounts of the Kings of Judah and Israel in the Bible, I am always amazed at that point in Judah's history when the Book of the Law (or *Torah*) had been buried and forgotten in the Land (2 Kings 22).

Unfortunately, the situation is not much different in our time. I am equally amazed at the high rate of biblical illiteracy in the American church today. Although the Bible is within reach of every American, it is virtually buried in many homes and churches. Nevertheless, it is because of biblical illiteracy and a few peripheral factors that we have misunderstandings over many aspects of our faith.

I want to take a moment to address just one specific aspect of our faith that is sorely misunderstood. Does the Bible say that we will know everyone from our former lives once we are in heaven? This is important because it affects our hope for the future. Will I recognize my wife, Amber, as only another sister in Christ, or will I remember that she was my wife in my former life? Will I recognize that my sister, Chelsea, is not only my sister in Christ but my sister by blood in my former life? Many Christians are wrestling with this because we all wonder if we will get to genuinely be reunited in heaven with those of our former lives. Answers vary depending on who you ask. Misunderstandings over the afterlife are not by-products of biblical illiteracy alone; it's also because the afterlife is NOT being preached anymore. In fact, heaven is ignored almost as much as hell in many pulpits.

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I firmly believe Scripture teaches that we *will* be able to recognize those we knew in this life once in heaven. However, there are also sincere, born-again believers in Christ who know the Bible well and would disagree with me, not because of biblical illiteracy or ignorance, but because they fear robbing God of His glory. Therefore, my purpose here is to lovingly reason from Scripture against that notion by articulating three objections from the opposing side and then answering them from Scripture.

The first objection is that if we knew everyone in heaven, we would know our former spouses, which contradicts Jesus in Matthew 22:30 saying that "in the resurrection [we] neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (ESV). Therefore, God will have to permanently remove the distraction of recognizing our former spouses from memory. In response to this, let me first acknowledge the truth that our marriage covenants (even the happiest of marriages) are declared to be absolved upon death elsewhere in Scripture. First Corinthians 7:39 states that a "wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord" (see also Rom. 7:2). However, saying anything more than this involves inserting an idea into Scripture that is not there. Clearly, the purpose for marriage covenants will end. In Ephesians 5 marriage is a picture of our Lord's love

for His Redeemed. This picture becomes unnecessary once Christ's Bride is with Him in glory. Furthermore, procreation will not be necessary either.

None of this indicates a divine memory wipe! I see no indication in Scripture that Adam will not recognize Eve. I cannot find where God's Word says Abraham will not know who Sarah was. Without sin natures, these relationships are guaranteed to be improved in the Kingdom. I have no doubt that Jacob, Rachel, and Leah now have power from on high to love each other with a pure and holy love; with marriage obsolete they are no longer burdened with jealousy, bitterness, and resentment. If Adam and Eve could recognize each other prior to the Fall without diminishing God or sinning, I see no reason to believe that this is impossible with Paradise restored.

This debate really involves whether the saints retain their personal identities in the afterlife. *Consequently, the second objection from the opposing side speculates that we should be so consumed with meeting the Lord Jesus that we are wrong in hoping to recognize anyone from our former lives because it robs God of His glory.* My initial reaction to this objection is that Scripture itself indicates that personal identities are retained after death. King Saul was able to recognize Samuel by unlawfully consulting the medium at Endor (1 Sam. 28:3-25). King David no longer mourned the loss of his infant son knowing that they would one day be reunited. After his child died, David said, "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me" (2 Sam. 12:23). This is especially comforting to me because Amber and I had a miscarriage six years ago. Thankfully, Scripture is chock-full of examples of saints being recognized after death. The pinnacle of examples would be that Jesus Himself was recognizable after His resurrection. Consider that Elijah and Moses were recognized at Jesus' transfiguration (Matt. 17). Furthermore, Paul comforted the Thessalonians with the hope of being "caught up *together* with them [those who died before us]" at the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:17).

Does retaining personal, recognizable identities somehow rob God of His glory? No! First, in our glorified bodies, our ability to idolize someone else over God will be impossible. Second, consider that for eternity God Himself will memorialize men like the apostles and the twelve sons of Israel by inscribing their names on the gates and foundations of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:12-14). Also, Jesus clearly declared that many will "come from east and west, [to] recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob *in the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt. 8:11, HCSB). Without being robbed of glory, God will reward faithful saints like the patriarchs and the apostles with the privilege of fellowshiping with the whole host of heaven while they in no way will commit idolatry against the Lord.

The last objection to my position is the idea of a divine memory wipe itself. The opposing side cannot envision God wiping away every tear from our eyes in heaven (Rev. 21:4) without first preventing us from remembering the sins, pains, and sorrows of this life, and since our earthly relationships in this life inevitably involved sin and pain, we shouldn't expect to remember this life, or anyone in it, at all. In answering this objection, we would be more at risk of robbing God of glory if we did not remember what He redeemed us from! Jesus Himself retained the markings of crucifixion in His body, *after the resurrection* (John 20:27)! I believe we will have the ability to know what we were redeemed from in our former lives while having the power to not remember it in a way that causes grief. This mirrors how God does not wipe His memory and forget His great story of redemption, yet He has the power to "remember [our] sins no more" (Heb. 8:12, ESV). Also, Scripture indicates that being forgotten by losing our personal identities is a punishment that God inflicts on the wicked of hell and not the saints of heaven. Psalm 9:5-6 says, God has "blotted out their names forever and ever . . . the very memory of them [the wicked] has perished." Indeed, it seems the only people we won't remember in heaven are those

who are in hell. It's quite possible that we will know they are there, but we will have the power to forget them in righteousness. Notice that in the story of Lazarus, Abraham, and the rich man, we are not told the name of the rich man (Luke 16:19-31). Could it be that it's because his name is blotted out?

In closing, my hope with this article is that no one in Christ's church has their joy stolen from them by misunderstanding Scripture. I said in my [last article](#) that God is relational, and He created us to be relational beings. It is much more in harmony with Scripture for the saints to view life after death as a blessed reunion where our relationships with God and with each other are perfected, something we can all look forward to.

About the Author



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