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Will There Be Personal

Recognition in Heaven? — By Wayne Jackson

Does individual personality survive the death of the body? Does recognition of friends and loved ones exist beyond this present life? The question is of more than passing emotional interest; it involves the very essence of the human spirit. The biblical evidence firmly supports the position of personal identity after death. Contrary to the misguided theories of philosophical and religious materialists (i. e., those who contend that man is wholly mortal), the human being is more than simply “body.” There is an element of mankind that is created in the image of God (**Genesis 1:26**), and yet, clearly, God is not a physical Being (**John 4:24; Luke 24:39; Matthew 16:17**). Logic demands, therefore, that there is something within man that transcends the fleshly level. Daniel once declared that his “spirit” was grieved in the midst of his body (**7:15**). Grief is an emotion of mind, not flesh. Paul affirmed that the “spirit of man, which is in him,” possesses knowledge (**1 Corinthians 2:11**). Without question, there is a conscious entity within man known as the spirit (cf. **John 13:21; Luke 1:47; 1 Corinthians 16:18; Ephesians 3:16**; etc.). Here is a very important point. There is absolutely no evidence that the spirit of a human being is **altered** by death. At the death of the body, the spirit simply passes from one mode of existence into another. That spirit, however, is just as conscious, just as

capable of recognition, as before the transition. If anything, the awareness of the spirit after death will be enhanced due to its release from the limitations of the flesh. There is certainly nothing in the Bible to suggest that God’s rational creatures would be unable to recognize one another after the demise of the body. The evidence is quite to the contrary. The question is most appropriate: “Is there recognition in heaven?” Let us consider the evidence.

Affirmative Evidence for Personal Recognition After Death ---- Let us reflect upon several lines of evidence — from both Testaments — regarding this important issue.

Abraham Gathered to His People — Concerning the father of the Hebrew nation, Moses wrote: “*And Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years, and was gathered to his people*” (**Genesis 25:8**). This cannot refer to the interment of the patriarch’s body, for he was buried near Mamre in Canaan. Yet his ancestors had been entombed hundreds of miles away in distant lands. The expressions “gathered to his people,” “*going to the fathers*” (**Genesis 15:15**), and “*gathered to his fathers*” (**Judges 2:10**), are constantly distinguished from being buried. They denote reunion with faithful loved ones in Sheol, the state of departed spirits (cf. Keil & Delitzsch, 1980, I.263).

Jacob’s Mourning of Joseph ---- When Jacob was deceived by his sons into believing that his beloved Joseph had been devoured by wild beasts, he lamented — “I will go down to Sheol to my son mourning” (**Genesis 37:35**). He certainly was not anticipating joining Joseph in some common grave, for Joseph had no grave (from the grieving Jacob’s viewpoint). He expected to be reunited with his son in Sheol, hence, recognition is implied. Similarly, centuries later, when David lost his infant son, he cried: “Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Samuel 12:23). R. Payne Smith comments: “the words indicate a belief in the continued existence of the child, and even that David would recognize and know him in the future world” (1962, 4.290).

Isaiah’s Parable of the King of Babylon. The prophet Isaiah gave a parable concerning the king of Babylon. The ruler is pictured as descending into Sheol where he is tauntingly greeted by former associates of the earth in the following fashion: “*How you are fallen from heaven, O day-star, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you that laid low the nations*” (**14:12**). This passage demonstrates the fact of the conscious state of the souls of the dead in Hades, their power to exchange thoughts, and their vivid recollection of their past circumstances” (Vine, 1971, 55).
Jesus Prophecy of the Heavenly Gathering ---- In prophesying the Gentile response to the gospel, Jesus declared: “*many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven*” (**Matthew 8:11**). Here is an intriguing question: will the recipients of this great promise realize its fulfillment, i.e., will they actually have association with those patriarchs in heaven? And will they know those

Old Testament worthies as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Surely, for a promise that is incapable of being recognized as such is no promise at all! If we shall know Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, does it not inevitably follow that those venerable men (grandfather, father, and son) also will know each other? The question hardly requires a response.

The Transfiguration ---- There is a form of argument, used frequently in the New Testament, known as *a fortiori* reasoning. It suggests that where there are two similar propositions to be proved, one more difficult than the other, if the harder is demonstrated first, the easier is assumed to be established. For instance, if God cares for the birds (lesser creatures), surely he will care for his people (the greater) (**Matthew 6:26**). If our Father has already given his Son, will he not supply us with other gifts as well (**Romans 8:32**)? With this principle in mind, recall the transfiguration scene (**Matthew 17:1ff**). Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and with them ascended a high mountain, where he was transfigured (changed in form) before them. In connection with this glorious event, there appeared Moses and Elijah, who talked with the Lord. In spite of the fact that these Old Testament saints had been dead for centuries, the apostles clearly recognized them, for Peter proposed the building of three tabernacles—one for Christ, one for Moses, and one for Elijah (**17:4**). The point is this: if this context teaches that those whom we have not personally known on earth can be recognized after death, then surely it must imply that those whom we **have** known in time will be familiar to us in the future state.

The Great Judgement Scene ---- In **Matthew 25:31ff**, Christ spoke of the great day of judgment. He describes a conversation that might occur at that time. To the righteous he

says: “Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me, I was in prison, and you came unto me.” Those disciples are then represented as reflecting back upon their earthly sojourn, but they cannot remember personally ministering to the Savior. He then informs them that in caring for his brethren, they were serving him. A careful consideration of the Lord’s illustration plainly implies that after death there is memory of both earthly events and persons (cf. **2 Corinthians 5:10**).

The Unrighteous Steward ---- In one of his famous parables, Jesus told of a certain “unrighteous steward” who was dismissed from his position. In anticipation of his pending unemployment, the steward reduced the debts of certain men who owed his Lord. Though the business ethics of this servant were reprehensible, nevertheless, the man’s master recognized a certain shrewdness in his action, in that he had used his present resources to make preparation for the future. The application that Christ makes of the matter is this: “*Make to yourselves friends by means the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles*” (**Luke 16:9**). The principle being taught is this: use your financial means to do good now [i.e., work for the saving of souls], so that when it [your money] fails [by reason of your death, or the end of time] they [your converts] will welcome you into the eternal abiding place. This certainly indicates future recognition of present associates. As one scholar has noted: It is well to mark the hint we have here that we shall meet and know in heaven the friends

whom we have known on earth. If those whom we have benefited on earth shall meet and welcome us in heaven, surely also will beloved friends and relatives do the same” (How, 1881, *in loco*).

The Rich Man and Lazarus ---- In the narrative concerning the rich man and Lazarus (**Luke 16:19-31**), a very important truth is emphasized. Death does not abolish earth’s memories. First, the rich man saw and recognized Lazarus (**16:23**). There is personal cognizance after death! Second, he was challenged to remember his own past. Finally, he recalled his unprepared brothers back on earth. R. C. Foster has observed: “Remember indicates the survival of personality, for it required the retention of memory. If we could not remember or recognize ourselves, there would no longer be personality. Heaven and hell would no longer have significance” (1971, 959).

Our Hope, Our Joy, Our Crown ---- The Scriptures confidently affirm that one of the great joys of heaven will be in seeing the fruits of our earthly labors in the Lord, i.e., being with those whom we have led to Christ. For example, reflect upon Paul’s exclamation to the brethren of Thessalonica. “*For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of glorying? Are not even you, before our Lord Jesus at his coming? For you are our glory and our joy*” (**1 Thessalonians 2:19-20**). Surely there is future recognition here. James Macknight commented: “The manner in which the apostle speaks of the Thessalonians in this passage, shows that he expected to know his converts at the day of judgment. If so, we may hope to know our relations and friends then” (1954, 408).

The Case of Onesimus ---- Onesimus was a slave who had fled from his master, Philemon, who lived in Colossae. The fugitive found his way to Rome where he came in contact with

Paul. The apostle led him to the Lord and presently dispatched him back to his master, bearing the epistle called “Philemon.” Paul commends both master and servant, but he seeks to persuade Philemon to receive Onesimus as a “brother in the Lord.” The apostle raises the possibility that “providence” was involved in this situation. “Perhaps” this slave had “been separated” (the passive voice is significant) from his master temporarily so that he might “have him forever” (**v. 15**). This statement clearly implies future recognition and association. It is a thrilling affirmation! Lightfoot described it as an “eternal interchange of friendship” (1892, 340).

Objections Considered ---- Some, however, feel that there are objections to the possibility of recognition after death. We will consider a few of these. **No Flesh and Blood in Heaven?** ---- It is occasionally suggested that we recognize one another only on the basis of physical features, and since we will not be flesh and blood in the future state (**1 Corinthians 15:50**), there could be no future recognition. This argument is flawed in several particulars. First, it contradicts numerous other passages, such as those presented above. Second, it would suggest that we would not even be able to know God in the future since he is spirit (**John 4:24**), and not physical (**Luke 24:39**)—a conclusion hardly warranted. Third, it is not true that we only recognize others because of physical traits. A loved one may suffer a horrible tragedy and have their physical features completely reconstructed by means of plastic surgery. He or she may appear totally different, yet we have no difficulty in knowing the person! No Friends in Heaven? It is argued that the psalmist asked: “Whom have I in heaven but you [God]?” (**Psalm 73:25**), thus suggesting no other of his

acquaintances was there. That is a woefully weak objection. The next clause affirms: “And there is none upon earth that I desire but you.” The writer is declaring his **total dependence** upon Jehovah; he is not discussing recognition. **How Can I Be Happy in Heaven, If My Loved Ones Are Not Present?** ---- The most common concern regarding recognition after death is this. If one is able to personally know his loved ones in heaven, will he not also be aware of those **not** there? How could one be truly happy under such circumstances? We may not be able to fathom everything about this matter from an emotional standpoint. However, we can logically demonstrate that the problem will be resolved. Surely no one would dare to argue that the affection of our earthly relationships can even begin to rival the benevolent love of our Creator for humanity. Need we be reminded of **Romans 5:7-8**? Our love pales in contrast to divine affection. Yet, unquestionably, God is happy! Paul speaks of the “happy” God (**1 Timothy 1:11; 6:15**). If the Lord can thus be happy, even though knowing of the many that are eternally lost, we may be confident that our heartaches will be fully remedied. God will wipe away **every** tear (cf. **Revelation 7:17; 21:4**). Moreover, no one will be in hell who does not deserve to be there. When we have passed from this life we will have a much sharper view of sin and the hideous nature of rebelling against God. Those of our loved ones who find themselves lost will not appear to us in the same sympathetic light as we saw them through the limitations of fleshly examination.

Yes, we may have perfect confidence that there will be many joyful reunions after we have passed through death’s dark valley. May we thus press toward the goal in anticipation of the glories that ultimately be revealed!