

The Knowledge of the Saints in Heaven
1 Corinthians 13:8-13

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For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 1 Cor. 13:12

A day like this with a *Totenfest* theme raises a frequently asked question. Believers in the afterlife often ask, “Will I know or recognize my loved ones in heaven?”

A flippant answer comes from G. Campbell Morgan, an old-time preacher who was well-known, particularly in conservative circles, in the first half of the twentieth century. Someone asked Campbell Morgan if they would know their loved ones in heaven, and he answered, “Of course! You don’t expect to be dumber there than you are here, do you?”¹

Since we do not want to rest content with a flippant answer, let’s turn to the New Testament for its insights. Candidly, there is – at least to my knowledge – no New Testament text that gives a full description of the afterlife, detailing the company of heaven and the interactions of the saints dwelling there. Nevertheless, the New Testament repeatedly looks toward the heavenly life in ways that provide hints into its nature, generating hope.

One of the clearest New Testament passages on the subject of the knowledge people have in heaven is 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. An exposition of this text yields four affirmations about the knowledge of the saints in heaven.

Our knowledge now is incomplete.

Before we wander too deeply into the question of what we will know about our loved ones then when we arrive in heaven, we should confess we don’t know them now.

Paul’s language in our passage is forthright. Our knowledge now is in part, partial, and dim. He drives this point home at least four times in this brief paragraph.

So here is something for us to admit. We may speak of knowing people so well we can finish their sentences, read them like a book, or see right through them. But the fact is that we do not know them, we do not know even those whom we think we know best. Even when it comes to the people we believe we know the best, we do not know what it is like to walk in their shoes, think with their minds, see with their eyes, or feel with their skins. The other person, even the most deeply loved, is a mystery to us.

Our first affirmation concerning what we will know in heaven is that we do not know people now.

¹ Jill Morgan, *This Was His Faith: The Expository Letters of G. Campbell Morgan* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1952).

Our knowledge now will come to an end.

Paul's language here is stark and sobering: "as for knowledge, it will come to an end."

We have no illusions about that. We certainly have no illusions about it on a day like this. Death comes and puts its stop to life. That day will come to us all. John Donne, the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, was, in 1624, thinking of the tolling of the funeral bell, marking the death of someone in the parish. His well-known line about that is thought to be a poem but it comes from a sermon, Meditation 17. You remember it, I'm sure: "Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

Whether it comes late or soon, as friend or foe, death will come to us all, and our knowledge here, our knowledge now, will come to an end. That is our second affirmation: our knowledge now is incomplete and it will come to an end.

Our knowledge now will be replaced with a better knowledge then.

Paul writes in our text of the arrival of the complete: "when the complete comes." He will write of the resurrection later, in 1 Corinthians 15; but here, in 1 Corinthians 13, he hints at the resurrection. The partial will come to an end and the complete will take its place. Heaven will be a place of new knowledge, of new knowing.

This differs sharply from the Old Testament idea of Sheol or The Pit. That was the abode of the dead. It was not thought to be much of an existence. It was shadowy, drab, dreary, and forlorn. One of the psalmists said there is no remembrance of God in Sheol (Ps. 6:5), and another psalmist said there is not worship of God in Sheol (Ps. 115:17). The prophet Isaiah said there is no gratitude in Sheol and there is no hope in Sheol (Is. 38:18). So Sheol, the abode of the dead in Old Testament understanding, was dismal, drab, and dreary.

Heaven, as the New Testament portrays it, is not like that at all. It is full of light and liveliness and music, all surrounding the fullness of the presence of the glory of God. And Paul here remarks there is knowing in heaven. Whatever heaven is, it is not ignorance. It is a place and life of seeing, knowing, understanding, and enjoying completeness in the faith, hope, and love that abide.

So that is our third affirmation. Our knowledge here is incomplete. Our knowledge here will come to an end. Our knowledge here will be replaced there with knowledge that is better.

That brings us to our fourth affirmation, which is really the one I want to get to because it is the point of the sermon.

Our better knowledge then will overlap with our imperfect knowledge now.

Paul uses as a descriptive image the growth of a person from childhood to adulthood. "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put away childish ways." Note that in this the form of the person is different (childhood, adulthood) but the subject is the same (I): the person changes but remains the same person.

Paul will use another image in 1 Corinthians 15. There he will speak of the growth of a plant from seed to sprout to stem to leaf.

The idea in both images is that the resurrected life is different from life now but it is not other than life now. Seed corn becomes a cornstalk; it does not become alfalfa or wheat or oats or anything else. The same is the case with you. When you are raised to the afterlife, you will still be you. You will be different as the child is different from the adult, but just as the adult can look back and recognize the child so you in heaven will carry memory and recognition with you.

The point is, there will be continuity in the resurrection, continuity between the then and the now, between what you will know then and what you know now. You will carry memories and loves and experiences with you. They will be transcended. They will be perfected. But they will not be destroyed. The earthly you will somehow still be in you just as the child is still in the adult. So our fourth affirmation on the basis of this text is that our knowledge then will overlap our knowledge now.

So the flippant answer is actually the right answer! You will not be dumber than you are now! Your imperfect knowledge here will end and be replaced by a perfect knowledge then, but that perfect knowledge then is somehow contiguous with your knowledge now.

Jimmy Carter was recently quoted as saying he is not afraid of death. He will be sad at the thought of leaving his loved ones behind, he said, but he is cheered by the Christian hope he will see them again.²

You can have the same hope. You will not be dumber in heaven than you are now. You will know your loved ones. And you will know them in a way that is better, richer, and more wonderful than the way you know them now.

² Janice McDonald, "President Jimmy Carter 'said a prayer' and is 'at ease' with death during church service," ABC News, November 3, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/president-jimmy-carter-prayed-peace-death-church-service/story?id=66724139>. Accessed November 20, 2019.