

Knowing Your Family in Heaven

A 15-minute class summary — Pleasant Springs Church, Discipleship School

Full six-lesson series: ps-church.com/discipleship/family-in-heaven

Before you start — notes for the teacher (*not read aloud*)

Timing. About **15 minutes** at a normal teaching pace. The bracketed times are cumulative. The **[9:30] Second Temple section is optional** — it adds about two minutes and nothing else in the lesson depends on it. **Core script ≈ 15 minutes; with the optional section ≈ 17. Never cut the last section** — it is the reason the class exists.

Who is in the room. Assume that at least one person present has buried someone this year, and at least one is carrying a family member they are not sure about. That second person is who the last four minutes are for. **Do not rush them.**

The one rule this lesson keeps. On the final question there is a point past which Scripture gives no reason. The series stops there on purpose. **If someone presses you for an answer the Bible does not give, say "I don't know, and the Bible doesn't say" — that is the faithful answer, not a failure.**

What not to say. Four things this class specifically refuses (they come up every time): *"Everyone will be there in the end"* · *"You won't remember them"* · *"You won't care"* · *"You already know who is lost."* Minute 11:00 handles all four.

Scripture. All English, ESV. The language work behind the lesson is real but stays off this page — if someone wants the Greek, the columns are on the website.

Time of day. The script is deliberately time-neutral — no "tonight" or "this morning" — so it reads correctly whichever service it is taught in.

THE SCRIPT

[0:00] Open — two questions, not one

Somebody in this room has stood at a graveside. Everybody who does that eventually asks two questions. They sound like one. They are not.

The first: **will I know them?** Not "will I see somebody" — *will I know that it is her.*

The second is quieter, and most people never say it out loud: **what about the one who did not come?**

The first question has a much better biblical answer than most of you have been told. The second has a narrower one — and I am not going to pretend otherwise, because a comfort that is not true is not a comfort. It is just a thing that breaks later.

Fifteen minutes. Six lessons' worth. The whole series is online; I will tell you where at the end.

[1:30] The Old Testament says something in an obituary

The oldest thing the Bible says about this is hidden in a funeral notice.

Genesis 25:8 — "Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people."

Gathered to his people. Most of us hear that and think: they put him in the family grave.

Watch the very next verse.

Genesis 25:9 — "Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah."

Gathered in verse 8. **Buried in verse 9.** Two different things, one verse apart.

Then it gets decisive. Aaron dies on Mount Hor, hundreds of miles from where his ancestors are buried, and God says *let Aaron be gathered to his people*. Then Moses — told to go up the mountain and be gathered to his people. And then this:

Deuteronomy 34:6 — "and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab... but no one knows the place of his burial to this day."

Moses is gathered to his people while God buries him alone, in a valley, in a grave that no human being has ever found. No family tomb. No mourners at the graveside. Nobody even knows where it is.

So "gathered to his people" cannot mean the family grave. It describes what happens to *the person*, not the body. And the Old Testament says it like it is the most ordinary thing in the world. **The dead go to be with their own.**

Now — I have to be honest with you about the other half. The Old Testament also says this:

Psalms 88:10, 12 — "Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you?... Are your wonders known in the darkness?"

That psalm never resolves. Its last word in Hebrew is *darkness*. And Israel put it **in the hymnbook**. On purpose.

So if you have stood at a grave and not been able to see anything — **you are in the hymnbook**. That is allowed. Anybody who says the Bible has always plainly taught a detailed afterlife has not read Psalm 88.

[4:00] Jesus: the God of the living

Now to the one time somebody asks Jesus this to his face.

The Sadducees come with a trick question built entirely out of *family*. Seven brothers, one wife, they all die — whose wife is she in the resurrection? They are

trying to make the idea look ridiculous.

Jesus does two things. First he corrects the mechanics:

Mark 12:25 — "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."

Let that land honestly. **Marriage as we have it does not carry over.** I will not soften that.

But watch what he actually argues. He goes to the burning bush:

Matthew 22:32 — "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not God of the dead, but of the living."

The whole argument is a verb tense. Not *was*. **Is.** Centuries after all three funerals, God still introduces himself by three men's **personal names**.

Hear both halves. **An institution is removed. A person is not.** Abraham is still Abraham. Nothing there says you will not know your wife — it says you will not be married the way this life means it.

And the future he describes is a **meal with people you can name:**

Matthew 8:11 — "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."

But I have to give you the next verse too, because it is in the same breath:

Luke 13:28 — "In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out."

Jesus pictures people watching the family table from the outside. And he says it to people whose whole confidence was that Abraham was their father.

Being related does not save anybody. He puts that warning in the same sentence as the promise, and so must we.

[6:30] Paul says it outright

Here is the part most people have never had pointed out to them.

The oldest surviving Christian letter we have — about twenty years after the cross — was written because a young church had started burying its own members and panicked. They thought the ones who died had **missed it**.

Paul's answer is the most specific thing in the Bible on our question:

1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 — "And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up **together with them** in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."

Together with them. Paul could have written "you will be with the Lord" — true, and comforting. **He added two words.** The reunion of the living with the people they buried is not something preachers stuck onto this passage. **It is the argument.**

And look at how he opens it:

1 Thessalonians 4:13 — "...that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

He does **not** say *do not grieve*. He says do not grieve **like people who have no hope**. That is a comparison, not a prohibition. Hold on to that — it matters in about four minutes.

Two more, quickly, and then I want to tell you what one word does.

1 Corinthians 13:12 — "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

Whatever else eternity is, it is not the place where you know people less well than you do now.

And in Ephesians Paul kneels down and prays, and says God is the Father "**from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.**" Here is the thing you cannot see in English: the word Paul picked for "family" there is not a warm, general word. **It is a registry word** — the word Israel used for a line of descent written down in a census list. It shows up a hundred and eighty-six times in the Greek Old Testament, and most of those are in Numbers and Chronicles, the books that exist to enrol people by their ancestry.

God writes family lines down. In heaven. By name.

And Hebrews says the same thing with the other half of that vocabulary — it calls the people who have gone ahead of us "the assembly of the firstborn who are **enrolled in heaven.**" That word "enrolled" appears six times in the New Testament. **Five of them are Caesar's tax census. The sixth is heaven's list.**

[9:30] What the Jews before Jesus hoped — (cut this section first if short on time)

One note, carefully. Between the Testaments, Jewish writers argued this exact question in books that are **not in our Bible. We do not build doctrine on them.** But the people who first heard Jesus had read them, and two are worth knowing.

In **2 Maccabees**, a mother watches seven sons executed rather than deny God. To the last she says: accept death, *so that in God's mercy I may get you back together with your brothers.* **Get you back** — the word for reclaiming what belongs to you. A mother, a hundred and fifty years before Christ, saying she expects her family returned to her.

And in **2 Baruch**, written just after the temple fell, a man asks God flat out: *in what shape will the dead be raised?* The answer he is given is that God raises them **unchanged first** — so that, quoting, "*when they have severally recognized those whom they now know*" — and only *then* transforms them.

That is not Scripture and I am not teaching it as Scripture. But it tells you something true: the question you walked in with is not modern or sentimental. **People have asked it, in those words, for two thousand years.**

[11:00] The hard one

Now the one that keeps people awake. **What about the family member who does not come?**

Four things to clear away first. You have probably been handed at least one, and every one is a kindness that costs you something true.

One: "everybody will be there in the end." You cannot hold that and Luke 13:28 at the same time. Saying it to a grieving family costs them their Bible.

Two: "you won't remember them." There is a verse people use for this. But Revelation says God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes" — and friends, **you do not wipe a tear off a face that isn't crying.** That is not a picture of amnesia. That is a picture of a hand.

Three: "you won't care." That says heaven will make you **less loving than you are now.** And in Jesus' own story, the man in torment **still cares about his five brothers.** Any doctrine where the damned love their families and the redeemed do not has gone wrong somewhere.

Four: "you already know who is lost." You don't. Neither do I. There was a man who was converted with about three hours left to live, with no baptism, no church membership, and no witnesses but soldiers. **If he had been your**

brother, you would have buried him as one of the lost. Between a person's last conscious moment and God there is a room you cannot see into.

So what *can* we say?

Grief for the lost is not a failure of faith — it is in the Lord himself.

Jesus wept at a grave he was about to open, and wept over a city that **would not come.**

And here is the one I most want you to take home. Paul writes the most confident sentence in the Bible — nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." He finishes that paragraph. The very next thing he writes is this:

Romans 9:2–3 — "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

Unceasing. Not "I used to worry about my family." Unceasing. **And "kinsmen according to the flesh" — that is blood family.**

So the man who wrote that nothing can separate him from God's love carried, at the same time, in the same chest, **unending grief over his own unsaved family.** He does not resolve it. He does not apologise for it. **He does not tell himself he will eventually stop caring.**

If you are carrying both of those right now — assurance and anguish, at once — you are not doing it wrong. You are in the best company the New Testament has.

And what does Paul do with it? He prays. Chapter 10, verse 1: "*my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.*"

Here is where we stop, and I am telling you plainly that we are stopping.

Scripture does not tell us how the redeemed will hold that loss. People

have offered three or four explanations; not one is in the Bible. So I will not hand you one. I will hand you the sentence that *is* there:

Revelation 21:4 — "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore."

Notice who does it. It does not say there will have been nothing to cry about. It does not say you will be unable to cry. **It says God will wipe them away.** Himself. By hand. Off a specific face.

Whatever you carry into that morning — the last hands on it are his.

[13:30] Close

Two things, and we are done.

First. If this is a comfort to you today, take it. The shape of the whole Bible is that God knows people by name, keeps a list, raises bodies, reunites the living with the ones they buried, and ends up living with us in a real world with the crying finished. **No single verse says "you will recognise your mother."** **But the denial of it would be the strange thing.**

Second, the actual homework. In every passage we have looked at — in Scripture and outside it — the one thing everybody agrees on is that **the time to do something is now.** The man in torment wanted somebody sent to his brothers. Paul prayed and argued for his family for three straight chapters.

So I am not going to send you home comforted. **I am going to send you home to make a phone call.** You know who it is. You have known the whole time I have been talking.

Let's pray.

Father, you are the God of the living, and you call the dead by name. Thank you that nothing love has made is lost to you. For the ones we have buried, we give you thanks. For the ones we fear for, we will not stop asking. And for the sorrow we cannot put down, we trust your own promise — that you will wipe away every tear from our eyes, with your own hand. Until then, make us the kind of family that talks while there is still time. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

If you only remember three things

1. **"Gathered to his people" is about the person, not the grave.** Moses has the phrase and a grave nobody has ever found.
 2. **"Caught up *together with them*."** Paul added those two words on purpose, in the oldest Christian letter we have, for people who had just buried their friends.
 3. **Assurance and anguish can be carried at the same time.** Romans 8 and Romans 9 are back-to-back, by the same man, about his own family.
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The full series — ps-church.com/discipleship/family-in-heaven

Each lesson has the Septuagint and the ESV side by side, the author and audience of every passage, and the sources for everything claimed.

Lesson	What it covers
1 Gathered to His People	The Old Testament's quiet assumption, the honest silence of Psalm 88, David and the child, Job, Daniel 12
2 The God of the Living	The Sadducees' question, the Transfiguration, Luke 16, the table with Abraham — and the warning attached to it
3 Together With Them	1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 13:12, the census words behind Ephesians 3:15 and Hebrews 12:23, Revelation
4 What the Fathers Hoped	2 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, Tobit, 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra — witnesses, never Scripture
5 A Dense Crowd of Parents	Cyprian in the plague, Augustine grieving his mother, and the eight-point summary of what we actually teach
6 The One Who Does Not Come	The four answers we refuse, what Scripture does let us say, and where we stop

Appendices on the series home page: the word counts, every place the Hebrew and Greek disagree and what we follow, and a dated table of all the non-canonical witnesses.

Discussion starters — if you have time after

1. Before today, did you think "gathered to his people" meant the family grave? What changes if it doesn't?
2. Israel kept Psalm 88 — a psalm that never resolves — in the hymnbook. What does that permit you to say out loud?
3. Paul wrote "together with them." Why do you think those two words mattered enough to add?
4. Which of the four answers we refused have you been given? Which have you given somebody else?

5. Who is the phone call?

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