



Do our relatives who are in heaven watch over us?

That's a great question and it came from one of our Sunday School students after we'd been talking about life in heaven.

I know I sometimes wonder if my father - a mechanic in his life on earth - pleads with God to put this reminder in my brain: "Righty-tighty; lefty-loosy" when I'm under a car 'playing' mechanic and (as invariably happens) turning a bolt/nut the wrong way. I picture dad reminding God, "Remember, that poor boy doesn't have a 'mechanical bone' in his body."

God's Word is clear about some really important things about heaven. We'll hear one of those things from Jesus in our upcoming Good Friday worship. He tells the repentant thief on the cross next to Him, "I tell you the truth. Today you will be with me in paradise." The spirits of those who die trusting in Jesus will immediately go to be with Him in heaven. Other passages assure us that our spirits will be reunited with our 'glorified, imperishable bodies' on the day Jesus returns to earth. That's a great comfort!

God's word also indicates that His powerful angels watch over us for the purpose of providing protection for us. It also teaches that our departed loved ones don't become angels. That's an idea that makes for interesting TV shows and greeting cards, but is contrary to the Bible. We were created human and will remain human for eternity. Angels were created as 'ministering spirits' and will also remain that for eternity.

On the other hand, some things are not so clear, like what the spirits of departed saints are able to do and know while in the presence of Jesus until He returns on that Last Day when He will create the new heaven and earth.

Hebrews 12:1 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses ... let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

One interpretation of that passage is that those who have gone on before us in the faith are 'cheering us on' in our efforts to keep the faith. The implication is that God allows them at least glimpses of our lives and struggles on earth. Another interpretation of that passage is that these faithful departed are not 'witnesses' in the sense of watching us, but in the sense that their lives of faith serve as a witness / testimony to us. That interpretation suggests that our encouragement comes from the examples of 'keeping the faith' that our deceased loved ones set for us during the trials of their lives on earth.

Based on the context (particularly the content of Hebrews chapter 11), it seems to me that the second interpretation is likely the correct one - even though I like to imagine the first interpretation!

But there are indications (like in Revelation 6:9-10 and 8:3-4) that those who have died in the faith may be given glimpses of life on earth and are praying for us. Of those passages, Martin Luther wrote "The angels in heaven pray for us, as does Christ himself. So do the saints on earth and perhaps also in heaven. It does not follow, though that we should invoke and adore the angels and saints." It is comforting to know they pray for us, but we must remember they can't answer our prayers - only God has the power to do that.

It's good to always keep in mind that heaven's main focus is Christ. Even if those in heaven see some of what

happens here, they have no divine power to direct our lives. Only God has that, and He brings that powerful direction through His word and in answer to our prayers to Him.

The bottom line is that our real comfort comes, not from knowing that departed loved ones can see us, but rather from the fact that they can see Jesus. And maybe the best encouragement to 'keep the faith' comes from another fact: One day we will see Him... with them!

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net