

My Dad is back!

Hebrews 12:1-3

As most of you know, my Dad passed away a week ago Thursday while we were at Family Camp. It took quite a convergence of events for me to get the news. We had no cell service in the mountains and so my step-mom had no way to reach us with the news. Preethi, our son, Phil's wife, was on Facebook late Thursday night and saw that my sister, Keri, had posted that Dad had passed. Phil and Preethi were upset, thinking that they had been left out of the loop but when they started calling around to their siblings they found that no one else knew anything. After Granny Leah was called Jeff took responsibility for getting the word to us up on the mountain. Before just driving there he tried calling the park rangers who would not help but who suggested that the Inyo County Sherriff might be willing to do so. The Sherriff was willing but since Jeff did not know our site number at the campground he asked for the make and model of our car so that the deputy could identify us by driving through the campground. Jeff said that he did not know the make and model of our vehicle but that we drove a big yellow van. The Sherriff asked, "Do you know the make, model and year of the van?" and Jeff replied, "It is a really bright yellow van." And, based on that plethora of information, they found us. But, I was not at our campsite, appropriately, I was fishing. So our son Peter, got the word from the Sherriff and then passed it on to me.

My Dad has been a huge factor in my life. He took us to church Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night even though my mom stayed home. He volunteered as a Boy's Brigade leader, as a camp counselor (for several years). He made the financial commitment to send us to a Christian school from grade school through high school. He was a fine example of a man who served the Lord. He was my best man at our wedding. He helped us when we started a church in Stockton CA out of Bible College. He developed into something of a lay preacher and I always welcomed the opportunity to have him speak here at Calvary-Grace in Monrovia after we came in 1997.

My Dad had experience and wisdom. We shared the same values. He was my trusted confidant. And in August of 2007, I lost him. The bleeding stroke he suffered at 74 years of age caused permanent brain damage and loss of short term memory. He had a second and even more severe stroke 10 months later. After these strokes, he never drove again. Conversation with him was always very brief. He had to be looked after and could not be left alone. There were a very few exceptions. One time, it must have been about 8 years ago or something, Leah was gone for a night or two and arranged for my Dad's twin brother, Don, to come and stay with him for a couple days. I had arranged to come by and it happened to be when Dad and Uncle Don were together in this way. Leah made a Lasagna and left it for us to have that night and the three of us had dinner together. The conversation was carried by my uncle and myself but Dad participated with surprising wit and it almost seemed normal. In 11 years that was the only time I ever felt anything that seemed normal from my Dad. He was limited by his damaged brain to a very small world that had room for his wife, Leah, his home, his dog, and his TV shows. (Before the stroke, he never cared about TV at all.) He was aware of his extended family but not at a level that allowed him to participate in our lives. The new normal limited phone conversations with my Dad to a sentence or two, then, he was gone.

But now, My Dad is back! I am not saying this because I would like it to be true but because I believe that it is true. Since no one can know about the nature of the afterlife while we are on this side, we must depend upon the revelation we find in the Scriptures rather than upon our own imagination or anyone else's imagination as far as that goes.

Note that the Bible makes repeated and significant reference to the interest in heaven to the things going on upon the earth. The Book of Job shares an example of this heavenly fascination with the goings on here when God directs the attention of Satan to the faithfulness of His servant Job. Satan countered with the argument that Job was only faithful as a result of God's constant care and protection of His servant. And so the contest began... But for our purposes today we just want to observe that both God and Satan in heaven were current on the specific circumstances of Job's life on earth.

Daniel prayed from earth to heaven and his prayer started a heavenly conflict that lasted three weeks before the angelic messenger was able to break through with God's answer to Daniel's prayer and this was only due to the aid rendered that angel by Michael the arch angel. Again, Daniel prayed and all of heaven seems to have been watching and listening, both those who were for and against the Lord.

At the time of Jesus' birth, all of heaven was engaged in what was happening between heaven and earth. Gabriel visited Zachariah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds announcing that God's Son was being born in Bethlehem. He was joined by the angelic chorus, thousands of voices singing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." While Bethlehem slept, heaven knew what happened that night.

The Apostle Paul understood that the heavenly world waited with bated breath to see how it was that God was going to accomplish His purposes of redemption in our fallen world. God's plan was not clear to His co-inhabitants in heaven and so they waited and watched. Paul became a party to the ongoing drama and wrote, "To me, who am less than all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It is as if there is a one way window between heaven and earth. We cannot see what is happening in heaven but heaven can see what is happening here on earth.

But what of those who have gone before us, can they also see through this window? Jesus verified the presence of the departed saints in heaven when He spoke of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the God of the living rather than the dead. At the Mount of Transfiguration Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus and they spoke together of the things going on as Jesus approached His sacrifice on the cross. In Jesus' story of the Rich Man and Lazarus each of these men die and the rich man cries out to Father Abraham in the place of eternal bliss seeking

relief (just a drop of water to cool his tongue) in his place of torment. From there he sought mercy for his still living brothers upon the earth. Heaven was aware of the state the brothers were in but could do nothing to help them for they had all that they needed to see the truth and change.

Finally, let's read Heb. 12:1-3 "Therefore we also since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls."

The position of the witnesses in Hebrews 12:1 is ambiguous. The witnesses' identity is clear. They are the men and women of faith listed in chapter 11 and by implication the men and women of faith who have lived for God and for Christ until this day. Is the position one of witnessing to inquiring disciples from the testimonies of their faith whether in triumph or sacrifice? Or, is the position of their witness one of interest in the continuing drama of faith as it is played out in the lives of the present servants of the Lord? Paul's argument is that the presence of this cloud of witnesses should be a great incentive to present faith. Given that there is this cloud of witnesses we should lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us and run with endurance the race that is set before us. Each position works and offers incentive to the sincere disciple. Neither needs to exclude the other. Biblical ambiguity is beautiful. It is not accidental. We need not choose. The witness of the great faith chapter is instructive and inspiring and hopeful. But it also helps to know that the witnesses are watching. Not in a spirit of judgment, but as those whose presence cheers us on. They are the crowd that lifts us to another level by means of their enthusiasm and faith - like what the fans do for the Dodgers at their home games.

For 11 years my Dad was gone and knew nothing of my life. For all of my life before then his understanding of his son was limited by what was possible for him to observe and by what I was willing to share. Now, He sees and knows like never

before. He is in heaven. It is a heaven that is caught up in the drama now taking place on earth. It is a heaven that is watching. They have a one way window and they can see. We cannot see them but they can see us. For 11 years my Dad was gone but now he's back. He sees. He knows. Welcome back Dad! I missed you.