

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Gathered to his People

Then 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. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre. (Genesis 25:8-9)

In Scripture, God repeatedly and simply reveals the important truths for us to learn and to know with conviction. Few topics receive such careful and detailed treatment in Scripture as the experience of death and what lies beyond it. We find ample Biblical evidence of this teaching in many powerful New Testament passages, but we also find similar evidence in the Old Testament.

"...and was gathered to his people." The verses quoted document several separate, distinct events.

1. Abraham gave up the ghost. He died.
2. He "...died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years." He lived a long, full life. His life was not cut short. Some commentaries attribute a sense of completion and well-being to the term "full of years." The suggestion is that Abraham did not die with a heavy heart full of regrets or unfinished business.
3. He was "...gathered to his people." This event is listed as distinct from Abraham's death or his burial in the cave with Sarah sometime after his death.
4. His sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah where he had earlier buried Sarah.

We find three additional passages in the Old Testament that use similar language. Genesis 15:15 contains God's comforting reminder to Abraham that his life would end as it did.

And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. (Genesis 15:15)

Notice the similar term, "...shalt go to thy fathers in peace." What a rich comfort, to live our life with the Lord's personal word of promise and grace to us that, in the end at death, we shall surely go to our fathers in peace. Genesis 35:29 repeats the same expression regarding Isaac, "...was gathered unto his people." And in the next generation, we read the same description of Jacob's death, Genesis 49:33.

There are times when most believers must deal with trials in life that leave them feeling alone and

isolated, even from their natural family. Who are our real "people"?

Dimly, vaguely, veiledly, but unmistakably, as it seems to me, is here expressed at least a premonition and feeling after the thought of an immortal self in Abraham that was not there in what "his sons Isaac, Ishmael laid in the cave at Macpelah," but was somewhere else and was for ever. That is the first thing hinted at here — the continuance of the personal being after death. Is there anything more? I think there is. Now, remember, Abraham's whole life was shaped by that commandment, "Get thee out from thy father's house, and from thy kindred, and from thy country." He never dwelt with his kindred; all his days he was a pilgrim and sojourner, a stranger in a strange land. But now he is gathered to his people. The life of isolation is over, the true social life is begun. He is no longer separated from those around him, or flung amidst those that are uncongenial to him. "He is gathered to his people"; he dwells with his own tribe; he is at home; he is in the city.¹

As this and any number of similar commentary quotes reminds us of Scripture's truth, the Lord has prepared us for a special place beyond this world, and He has designed that special place for us. While Scripture does on occasion give general descriptions of that glory world, we never see it clearly. For that matter, I suggest that human language and intellect cannot fully grasp what God has in store for His children in that place. Hebrews 11:9-10, 13-16 punctuates the life of Old Testament people of faith with a reminder of this world that lies still ahead of us. In those verses, as well as in the implications of the term "...gathered unto **his people**," we sense a distinct awareness of other people, indeed, our people, as an essential part of that world to come.

For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (Hebrews 11:10)

¹ *Biblical Illustrator*. Copied from SwordSearcher, electronic Bible study.

By general chronological estimates, Abraham lived around two thousand years before Christ and the first century AD. Yet the text speaks of Abraham's pursuit as if it were today, "...which hath foundations." The present tense verb reminds us that the city that Abraham sought was more than a place in the land that God promised to give to his heirs in coming generations. The city existed at the time that Paul wrote the Book of Hebrews. It is a city that has foundations. It is stable and permanent. That city exists today no less than in Abraham's or in Paul's day. We look for it and long for it just as Abraham and other Old Testament patriarchs of faith did.

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:13-16)

In these verses, the "Pilgrim" mindset expands to include all of those Old Testament saints. Despite living in different ages and cultures, they shared one common trait. By their lifestyle and attitude toward life, they acknowledged that this world is not their home. Accordingly, God reminds us that He fully knows this mindset and encourages it. He is "...not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city." If heaven and its certain joys were not true, the pilgrim mindset of believers would be a cruel fantasy. If God has actually prepared such a city for His people, and if that city exceeds our expectations, we conclude with Paul that God in no way leaves us to fall into discouragement or doubt. "...he hath prepared for them a city." Indeed, as you read these words, think—think with faith and joyful expectation—"He has prepared *for me* a city."

The concept of a "city" conveys the idea of a place fully populated. Abraham the sojourner—along with you and me in our sojourning mindset—expected something that God affirms is real. A city involves a whole lifestyle. It flavors every aspect of the life of those who live in it. It involves some degree of social interaction with other citizens of the city. We may easily fall into idolatry regarding these points, so we should embrace them with respect for Scripture's descriptions and limits. Let me give you an example. In my youth, I was friends with an older man, a godly, faithful man who was raised by his aunt. This aunt was a loving and kind woman who taught her nephew by godly example. With good reason, the man loved her dearly. On one

occasion after the aunt's death, my friend was talking with me and others about his belief that earthly relationships would be precisely carried over into heaven. In tears of love at the memory of his aunt, the man spoke words that shocked me, "If I thought that I'd get to heaven and not know her, I wouldn't want to be there." Clearly, the man had no Biblical support for his idea, especially his greater priority toward his loving aunt than for the Lord Himself. Terms such as those we here study make the point sufficiently plain that heaven shall be for us a "Social" place, a place where there is some element of knowledge and interaction with other redeemed people. Abraham was gathered to "...his people." God has prepared "...for them a city." However, Scripture equally reminds us that heaven shall be, first and foremost, a place where God is fully glorified and praised for loving grace and sure redemption. (Revelation 5:9-14; 1 Corinthians 15:28)

There is a glaring problem with my friend's view of heaven. If we know people in heaven as we knew them during our lives, we must accept that we shall not only know those loving, godly saints in our lives, but we shall know those "Unpleasant" people from our lives who may also be there. We can't have the idea one way and ignore the other. I believe Scripture clearly teaches personal individuality of each person in heaven, but in a new glorified relationship, not a perpetuation of our flawed earth relationships.

Abraham's "people" were not buried in the cave at Machpelah with Sarah. Our study verses set Abraham's burial apart as a later event distinct from his being "...gathered to his people." Immediately upon his death, Abraham was "...gathered to his people." However, sometime later Abraham's sons took his body to the cave and buried him with Sarah. From Scripture's testimony, at that time, only Abraham and Sarah were buried in the cave. Yet prior to Abraham's burial, we have Scripture's testimony. Abraham was "...gathered to his people." The man who had lived more years as a pilgrim than as a native at home was no longer a pilgrim. He was home at last. His days of wandering and looking for a city with foundations were ended.

Into the harbor of heav'n now we glide,
We're homeward bound, homeward bound;
Softly we drift on its bright silver tide,
We're homeward bound, homeward bound;
Glory to God! All our sorrows are o'er,
We stand secure on the glorified shore;
Glory to God, we will shout ever more,
We're home at last, home at last.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor