SHALL WE KNOW ONE ANOTHER IN ETERNAL LIFE?

Some people have wondered about the meaning of Isa 63:16, “For You are our Father, although Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us.” The passage acknowledged that the Lord is the Father of the people of Israel. The physical ancestors of the nation had died long ago and were unable to help it. The Lord was their Father, in power, wisdom, and love, and the nation had to look to Him alone for help. Whether those who have gone on to life beyond death are aware of our present troubles is doubtful. They are in bliss with the Lord, even before the resurrection at the last day. Knowing about our troubles would only make them sad! There is no assurance that they can intercede for us. Our prayers for help should be directed to God, our Father, through Jesus Christ our Mediator.

When Saul went to the witch at Endor, who brought up a spirit of the dead, we are told, “Then Saul knew that it was Samuel.” Although Saul was in disguise, the apparition recognised him. What “Samuel” then said was consistent with some of the kinds of things that Samuel told Saul while he was still alive (1 Sm 28). However, the question whether Saul saw the ghost of Samuel, or an apparition of a demon in the form of Samuel is difficult to answer.

Nevertheless, to the question, “Shall we know one another in eternal life?” the answer is regularly a confident “Yes.” The disciples recognised Jesus after He had risen from the dead, although we are told that some disciples doubted when the eleven disciples went to the mountain in Galilee where Jesus had told them to go and saw Him and worshipped Him. (Mt 28:16-17). We can ascribe their doubt to the fact that they were still bound to the present life, and Jesus’ body had been glorified. After Jesus rose from the dead with a glorified body there was less of the previous closeness. We are no longer told such things as John’s reclining at table close to Jesus (Jn 13:23-25). The disciples were more aware than before of Jesus’ glory and majesty. However, when Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for the gardener at Jesus’ tomb, she readily recognised Him by the sound of His voice in spite of the tears that filled her eyes (Jn 20:16).

Paul wrote, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does decay inherit what does not decay” (1 Cor 15:50). What he meant was not that bodies will no longer be human and distinguishable in the resurrection, but that the characteristic disadvantages of human existence since the fall into sin will be removed. We know those disadvantages all too well — in corruptible human bodies that are marked by sin, death, and decay. Human natures will be cleansed and changed. Paul had already explained that, when the bodies of believers are raised, they will no longer be corruptible, dishonourable, weak, and natural. We shall still have human bodies, but they will be changed, to be incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual (1 Cor 15:42-43). We have to add that we do not yet know what a spiritual body will be like.

In eternal life the believers will not lose their individuality. Christians do not believe, as many in Hinduism do, that eventually the faithful will be released from karma, absorbed into the deity, and cease to have separate existence. Christians believe in the resurrection of the body, and it is amazing that, in spite of the existence of millions of human beings in this present life, all have distinct characteristics, in looks. Even if the DNA of identical twins is the same, their fingerprints are not. There is no reason to suppose that such separate identity will be lost. Job asserted that after the last day his very own eyes would see his Lord. “I myself know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last He will stand on the dust. After this, my skin will surround this body, and from my flesh I shall see God. I myself shall see Him for myself. My own eyes will see, and not as a stranger” (Jb 19:25-27).

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At the transfiguration of Jesus, the disciples, who lived a long time after the death of Moses and after Elijah’s being taken up to heaven, recognised them as they spoke with Jesus in glory. Peter, although overcome by glory, and not knowing what he was saying, wanted to make tents for them. Clearly, he wanted that pleasant experience to continue.

Jewish people all counted Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as their forefathers. In Jesus’ story about the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man in Hades recognised from a distance the beggar Lazarus, whom he had neglected during his time on earth, and also father Abraham, in whose lap Lazarus reclined at the heavenly banquet. Jesus remarked, on another occasion, “Many will come from the east and the west, and will recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 8:11). This implies that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be readily recognisable. Those who join Abraham in the heavenly banquet will see him as Abraham, not
some nameless stranger. Our current memory-loss will be removed. We shall not need lengthy introductions. We shall not need to ask for the names of faces we have not met or have forgotten. Even those who are damned in hell will, to their lasting chagrin, witness the bliss of those whom they recognise with their Lord, bliss that they themselves cannot share. “Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.’ However, He will tell you, ‘I do not know you or where you are from. Go away from Me, all you evildoers!’ There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and see yourselves being thrown out. People will also come from the east and the west, and from the north and the south, and will recline at table in the kingdom of God” (Lk 13:26-29).

Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees’ question about the resurrection indicated that the relationship of husbands and wives will not continue. “In the resurrection, people do not marry, nor are they given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven” (Mt 22:30). However, the reunion there will be more wonderful than earthly relationships. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has comprehended, what God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor 2:9).

Shall we miss loved ones who do not enter eternal life? Since nothing there will make us sad, the answer is, “If there is such recognition, it will not cause sorrow.” In the story about the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham recognised the rich man and his failures, and gave the unpleasant reply that there was no remedy for his torment. However, we should be cautious about pushing details in such stories of Jesus beyond their point of comparison. In eternal life nothing will disturb perfect joy and peace. There will be no more death, sorrow, or pain. The former things will have passed away (Rv 21:4). It is impossible to think that there will be regret over no longer associating with people we had loved on earth when they are in eternal life with us.

As we consider our reunion with our loved ones and draw comfort from the prospect of a blessed reunion in eternal life, we remain aware that the greatest joy will be to be present with the Father, with our Saviour, and with the Holy Spirit for ever. The chief thing about eternal life will be our presence with the Lord. We shall be with Him where He is, see Him, and be like Him. The apostle John wrote, “We are now the children of God, but it has not yet been shown what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He is” (1 Jn 3:2). Paul comforted the Thessalonians by pointing out in that the resurrection believers together with those who are still alive on the last day will be reunited and find their common joy in being always with the Lord (1 Thess 4:13-18). David wrote, “In Your presence there is fullness of joy. At Your right hand there are pleasures for ever” (Ps 16:11).