

Do I need to know about the spiritual world and life after death when I'm not likely to die soon?

Where people know of and recognise, the name of Emanuel Swedenborg, more often than not it is in connection with his best known book, "*Heaven and Hell*" and the teaching that book contains about life after death. Swedenborg published "*Heaven and Hell*" in the year 1758. There has been a new printing of it, on average, every four years since then. With the exception of The Bible and John Bunyan's "*Pilgrim's Progress*", it has run to more editions and been translated into more languages than any other book.

The book, "*Heaven and Hell*" is in fact a remarkably detailed description of the spiritual world into which everyone is resurrected immediately after they "die". It was once described as being, "the most comprehensive description of life after death ever given to mankind". And an array of well known people have, over the years, acknowledged the deep impact the book had on them. In her book, "*Light in my Darkness*", the late Dr. Helen Keller wrote

"When I began *Heaven and Hell* I was as little aware of the new joy coming into my life as I had been years before when I stood on the piazza steps awaiting my teacher. Impelled only by the curiosity of a young girl who loves to read, I opened the big book and, lo, my fingers lighted upon a paragraph in the Preface about a blind woman whose darkness was illumined with beautiful truths from Swedenborg's writings.

She believed that they imparted a light to her mind which more than compensated her for the loss of earthly light. She never doubted that there was a spiritual body within the material, one with perfect senses, and that after a few dark years the eyes within her eyes would open to a world infinitely more wonderful, complete and satisfying than this. My heart gave a joyous bound. . . For the first time immortality put on intelligibility for me."

And Elizabeth Barrett Browning, another keen reader of Swedenborg, wrote that of all she read, "*Heaven and Hell* struck me most. (Swedenborg) is wonderful, it seems to me - his scheme of the natural and spiritual worlds and nature appears to me, in an internal light of its own, divine and true. . . I receive it as a self evident verity of which one wonders, 'Why did I not think of that before?' " (see "New Letters from Mrs. Browning to Isa Blagden", Edward C. McAleer, p596).

Swedenborg would in fact have been the last to think of himself as being in anything or in any way "Wonderful". He did not believe for one moment that what he wrote was from himself or the product of his own ingenuity. He believed himself called to be an instrument through which the teaching could be made known. Like most of his theological works, "Heaven and Hell" was published anonymously. Swedenborg wanted people to consider what he wrote on its own merits. Here was teaching not from him but from the Lord.

As for the purpose which lay behind the writing of the book Swedenborg had this to say, in the Author's Preface:

"The teaching now revealed in the following pages treats of heaven and hell, and at the same time of man's life after death. The man of the Church at this day knows scarcely anything about heaven and hell or about his life after death, although they are all set forth and described in the Word. Indeed, many people born within the Church even deny them, saying in their hearts, 'Who has come from that world and told us? Lest, therefore, such a negative attitude, which prevails especially with those who have much worldly wisdom, should also infect and corrupt the simple in heart and the simple in faith, it has been granted to me to associate with angels and to talk with them as man with man, also to see the things in the heavens as well as in the hells... Now, therefore, from what I have seen and heard, I am permitted to describe these things in the hope that, thus, ignorance may be enlightened and unbelief dispelled."

It surprises people at first that Swedenborg should say that the major points made about heaven and hell, as about life after death, "are all set forth and described in the Word." But that is so. The Lord, for example, talked very openly, very easily and very comfortably, about life after death in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, both of whom died, and one of whom went to heaven and the other of whom went to hell, consistent with the type of life they had chosen to live on earth.

Then again, it is said that when Jesus was transfigured there appeared Moses and Elijah "talking with him" (Matthew 17,3). How well this ties in with what Jesus elsewhere said that "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." (Matthew 22,32). And look at what Jesus said to the penitent thief crucified alongside of Him, "To day you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23,43).

"I can assert" wrote Swedenborg, "that man, as soon as he dies, is in the other life, and lives as a spiritual being there among other spiritual beings; and that he then appears to himself and to all others precisely as a man in the world, endowed with every sense, both internal and external, thus that the death of the body is only the casting away of such things as had served for use and function in the world; and, moreover, that death itself is a continuation of life, but in another world." (*Arcana Caelestia* 8939-2)

We believe this, not because Swedenborg said so, but because it is consistent with what the Lord Himself had earlier said, consistent with what He said to the penitent thief, and consistent also, with the obvious implications of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, that both had awakened to life in the spiritual world immediately after death.

And it doesn't stop there. Do you remember yet another parable, also involving a rich man whose land "brought forth plentifully". In the face of that good harvest all he could think of doing was to build bigger barns to selfishly hang on to his wealth so that thereafter he could be lazy and do what he pleased. "But God said to him, Fool! This night your soul is required of you." (Luke 12,20).

In other words, life in this world is by no means all there is or where it begins and ends. And the important thing is to live our lives in an awareness of the reality of the life hereafter and to remember our accountability for the things we possess and talents we have. Once again the ongoing nature of life, from one world into the other, is touched upon here.

Differently from what has previously been imagined, and from what in certain places in the Scriptures, seems to be taught, judgement is not like some courtroom situation, people separated from each other, perhaps arbitrarily, even against their wishes, some given the go ahead to proceed to heaven and some consigned to hell.

The judgement process, as Swedenborg wrote of it, is not like that. In reality people judge themselves. The thing is, that being what we are, possessing interests and inclinations which we have, not a lot of time passes after death before people seek out the company of others with whom they are most at home and with whom they are most comfortable. No one directs them or forces them to go anywhere.

Those in evil and who love evil detach themselves from the good and make their home in hell. Those in good and who love good, detach themselves from the evil and make their home in heaven. In both cases, it's what they want to do. In both cases it's what they choose to do.

A glance down the table of contents in the book, *Heaven and Hell*, is enough to indicate just how big a variety of subjects is covered in it. Much is said about the work and recreation of people in the spiritual world; about their homes; their clothes; their speech and communications; about how little children are cherished and cared for, how non Christians get on there, as also the rich and the poor, the wise and the simple. But is all this, it might be asked, really important? Do we need to know these things? Do I need to know about the spiritual world and the life after death when I'm not likely to die soon? Isn't it enough that I get on with the job of living the life that lies before me here and now in this world and come to terms with whatever awaits me in the spiritual world after I die?

We make a mistake, I suggest, if we think of teaching given about life after death as teaching concerned only with an event which may be 5, 10 or 30 years away. What the book *Heaven and Hell* does is to bring home to us, here and now, not only the reality of the spiritual world, but the importance of the choices we are making, day by day, hour by hour, between good and evil, truth and falsity. It causes us to see life here in its proper perspective. Rather than being impractical and dealing with the far away future, it is in fact, something which has the most practical bearing on our lives.

We know now, for example, that the Lord is leading us through life's experiences, both its high moments and its low moments, to find happiness, fulfilment and peace of mind in service to others. We also know that the purpose of our life here in this world will have been fulfilled not if we make a million dollars or have our name splashed across the papers in some eye catching headline, but if we in some measure conquer self love and self regard and come to cherish and live the ideals of love and service to others.

Here again, and because of the teaching given, we don't feel threatened by the different ages we pass through and the aging process itself, because we know now that all these things have a purpose. We come to see human relationships differently.

Our awareness, our acceptance, our acknowledgement of the reality of the spiritual world, and of the Lord's purpose in creating us, cannot but deeply influence our attitude to our children, and affect them, especially while they are under our care.

I repeat the point, teaching about the spiritual world and life after death, and our awareness and acceptance of it, cannot but influence thinking and attitudes here and now. It has the most practical bearing on the way we go about our lives.

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