

Death And Dying

As becomes clear the more we know and hear about it, one of the most basic of all human fears is the fear of dying. Inevitable though it is, death frightens people. Few of us are comfortable at handling it. If the subject comes up in conversation we swiftly try to get away from it. If a patient talks about it, the tendency is to scoff at the idea. And whilst there are those in our community who are sick or old (or both) and dying, we who are healthy and enjoying life find it impossible to accept that we ourselves will one day be in that position.

There are of course those who, within the context of medical science, are trying to alter the situation; who are trying to bring about change with regard to public attitudes to death and dying; who are urging more open acceptance both of death itself and of the process of dying. Much, from the medical viewpoint, has in recent years been written about it. The fear itself is now acknowledged and talked about. Happily, the subject is not quite the taboo it has been in the past.

Because of interest in it that is always there, I am taking up the subject of death and dying. However, not in terms of what medical science has been able to tell us about it, but drawing upon the wealth of information which is given in the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. I refer, in particular, to his book, *Heaven And Hell* published in 1758, the most widely read of them all. This book has been described as "the most comprehensive description of life after death ever given to mankind", and before taking up what is said there concerning death and dying, in particular, it is what is said concerning survival after death, in general, which I would like to speak about first of all.

Swedenborg wrote of the purpose which lies behind the creation of the universe as a heaven of angels from the human race. A teaching which becomes more and more understandable to us when we consider that God is a God of Love who desires to bless the lives of all people with happiness. All who are born into this world have been created by the Lord to find their way to heaven and to be happy there. The reason for our life in this world is that we ourselves might choose whether to respond to the Lord's purposes for us or not. The Lord wants our happiness, yet He does not force it upon us. Here, in this world of contrasts, of good and evil, our decision must be made.

In himself man is a spiritual being who, for the purpose of life in this world, is clothed with a physical body. And that physical body is the only thing that is left behind at death. Everything else is retained. Every faculty and every memory. So much is this so, wrote Swedenborg, "that it cannot be said that after death, which is only the death of the earthly body, the man will have lost anything of his own". (*Heaven and Hell* 461). Death is not the end. Far from it. Death is nothing other than the means of our consciously entering that world to which we are all destined from the beginning.

Even while we are in this world, as spiritual beings clothed with a physical body which we are, we are in unconscious association with the spiritual world. For the spiritual world is not something far distant and a long way removed from us. To the contrary, it is very close at hand. It is another dimension of consciousness. So long as we are in this world we operate on one particular level of consciousness. When we die we awaken to consciousness at another more interior, or higher level.

When a person awakens in the spiritual world he is neither in heaven nor in hell but in an intermediate region between the two. Only subsequently, and as their real character emerges, do people seek out and choose to be with others who are like themselves - either in heaven or in hell. No one judges another. People judge themselves. If some don't like the life that others are living in heaven they are not forced to stay there. It is they themselves who choose to go elsewhere.

And as for life in heaven, it is by no means without its challenges. Everyone there has a particular use to perform. There are in fact a great number of communities there which, as with the organs of the body, though each serves a particular function they interact with one another and form a harmonious unit.

General points as these are, I would like to turn now to what is said, in particular, about death and dying. This is what we are especially concerned with. Let us note first of all that what happens at death is not impersonal and a process which takes place in some automatic and mechanistic fashion. Resurrection into the spiritual world is of the Lord alone. It is from Him alone that it is accomplished.

Whilst angels are involved it is from His strength and love that they are able to do their work. The Lord resurrects people into the spiritual world. People do not resurrect themselves. And it is an eminently gentle and tranquil interval of our lives.

The second point which we are to note is that what happens at death is not a single, sudden event, but a series of events. As we shall see, resurrection is gradual. A number of steps are involved.

When speaking of death, Swedenborg wrote of it as being "like sleep" (*True Christian Religion* 160⁷) and of a person's awareness in waking from it, of the loving presence of nearby angels. Angels whose presence brings comfort, serenity, and a deep feeling of peacefulness. Nothing that would cause anxiety is allowed to intrude and the whole situation is handled with great tenderness and feeling. (see *Spiritual Diary* 1114).

Not for some time is it conveyed to a person, and then only fleetingly, that he is now a spirit. And whilst this marks the second distinct stage of resurrection, the knowledge or perception is soon forgotten as he enters the third stage when, thinking he is still in the natural world, he begins to sense a new surge of life within himself. At this stage it hasn't really dawned on him that he has died and entered the spiritual world. (He may not have previously believed in the existence of the spiritual world anyway). Then comes the next stage when he is told and his resurrection is discussed with him. And after what is variously self-reproachment for not believing in the continuity of life after death, disbelief, sheer astonishment, or joy and happiness, people enquire about heaven and after relatives and friends with whom there is reunion. There is rejoicing at seeing their friends again and their friends rejoice that they have come. "Very commonly" wrote Swedenborg, "husband and wife come together and congratulate each other". (*Heaven and Hell* 494).

As I mentioned earlier in my talk, we cannot for long in the spiritual world, hide the type of person we really are within and the next or fifth stage is the coming to the surface of that person we really are. Even our very appearance changes at this stage as our true character impresses itself upon our external features. From now on others can read in our face what we are, good or evil, selfish or unselfish. Things which were thought and cherished secretly now become manifest. Hidden things are laid open and secret things uncovered. "All men", it is said, "without exception are let into this state because it is the spirits own state"; and for those who lived a good life in the world, it is like "being aroused from sleep into full wakefulness, or like passing from darkness into light." (*Heaven and Hell* 504 and 506).

Only those who are preparing for life in heaven enter the next stage which is one of instruction; instruction which corrects false impressions that have been gathered in this world; instruction for people who have not known the Lord or whose understanding of Him was false or inadequate; instruction as to what really constitutes the good life, and so on. Even a person's highest ideals and noblest aspirations, about marriage for example, can be tainted by thoughts and ideas which have had an impact on him while he has lived in this natural world. And these need to be shed and put away.

The last of the stages of resurrection is arrival in heaven; a wonderful sense accompanying it, as Swedenborg describes it, of coming home and being among those to whom one interiorly belongs. "Everyone after death", he wrote, "comes into a society of his own people, that is, of those who are in a similar love, and whom he recognises as relatives and friends; and when he meets them it is as if he had known them from infancy. This is the result of (the) spiritual relationship and friendship (which exists). (*Divine Providence* 338⁴).

No matter what the circumstances were surrounding death, for the person (or people) concerned it is always a peaceful experience and they themselves have no subsequent memory of it. Indeed it is a remarkable thing that in time a person's memory of all that was connected with this world fades and they come not to remember the name they were known by, the town they lived in, even the job they worked at. This is necessary if they are to disentangle themselves from this world and make progress in the spiritual world. In time people in the spiritual world forget altogether that they have lived in the natural world, they becoming so preoccupied and absorbed with the life they are then leading. What is wonderful is that old age and feebleness into which the great majority of people come before they die is of the body only and once in the spiritual world they return "into the springtime of their youth".

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