

## **Straightening Out Misconceptions About The Life After Death (2)**

What must be one of the most widespread misconceptions people have about the life after death is that we enter a 'limbo' existence when we die; that we fall asleep; perhaps for years, even for generations; until a general day of resurrection.

The apostle Paul spoke in these terms in his first epistle to the Thessalonians, and it is a belief that remains with people in the Christian Church to this day. He wrote there: "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will not certainly precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first." (Chapter 4: 13-16).

I can remember, as a boy, looking at a book I had, at a picture of people standing up in their graves; a picture meant, I later realised, to depict this promise which Paul holds out here in Thessalonians.

It is never wise, though, to take one passage of Scripture in isolation, alone, as if this is the final word on a subject. And this is demonstrably so in this case. We would, for one thing, be hard pressed to prove that Paul thought his words at this point said it all; He was a man of limitations, gifted in many ways, but struggling for understanding as to what the truth actually is, at least in some cases. And what he says, must be placed alongside what else is said, particularly alongside what Jesus Himself said.

And when we come to what Jesus said we get an altogether different picture of what happens to us when we die.

There are, in fact, three places in the Gospels, and in His teaching, to which we would direct your attention. You may remember, that when Jesus was crucified two criminals were crucified, one on either side of Him. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man done nothing wrong."

"We are receiving" he said, "the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." And he turned to Jesus and said, "Remember me when you come in your kingdom". And Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23, verses 39 and following). I ask you to stop over these words for a moment and consider the implication.... "Today you will be with me in paradise." There could not be a much plainer statement of the ongoing nature of life after death. On another occasion, during His ministry, Jesus spoke a well-remembered parable about the rich man and Lazarus (see Luke: Chapter 16). "There was a rich man", He began, "who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores." Both men, as Jesus went on to say, died. And both are depicted in terms of ongoing life, being almost immediately conscious of the life awaiting them in the spiritual world after their death. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham afar off and Lazarus in his bosom." Some will argue, I know, that this is "only a parable". But would Jesus, even in the telling of a parable, say things which were not true or did not reflect the situation as it really is? Once again, the ongoing nature of life, from one world into the other; from this natural world into the spiritual world, is taught. It is as if there is scarcely an interruption. And far from being a state of sleep we, apparently, like both the rich and the poor man, become conscious of the new surroundings into which we come. There is one other such indication of the continuity of life after death in Jesus' teaching, and we find it in Matthew's Gospel Chapter 22. His conversation at the time and with His listeners had been about the life after death. And Jesus went on to say: "And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." That, too, deserves our careful thought and consideration. We need to stop and take in just what Jesus was saying. "Don't think of these people as dead. They are living. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." They are alive. They are not dead. Stop thinking of them in that way, as if they were.

"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 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 the continuation of life, but in another world." (*Arcana Caelestia* 8939<sup>2</sup>).

A week ago we briefly looked at the question of judgement, after death and at some of the misconceptions that have grown up about this. As we saw, it is the character we formed for ourselves in this world, and as the result of a multitude of free decisions we made here, which judges us after death. This is brought out in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in that the rich man, who lived selfishly and totally uncaringly, went to Hades or Hell after he died. Lazarus, the poor man at his gate, went to heaven. Not - it should be mentioned - that the external circumstances each was in, had anything to do with it. External circumstances as such don't. The poor man didn't go to heaven as a recompense for the poverty he had endured here. The rich man didn't go to hell because he was rich here. It is the inner nature or basic character of a person, regardless of whether they were rich or poor, which determines whether they go to heaven or hell.

As you are probably aware, it is another idea people have that riches automatically exclude a person from heaven. What was it that Jesus said? "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" But was Jesus talking about material possessions and earthly riches? And the answer is "No, He wasn't". He was speaking about knowledge and accomplishments which we think will earn us a place in heaven. In fact, they can act as a very real barrier preventing us entering there. People become proud of what they have done for others; proud of the gifts or the donations or whatever it is they have given; proud of their acts of 'charity' thinking that these things make them 'good'. It is to these people that the words of Revelation chapter 3, verse 17 apply: "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

We say again that it is not the circumstances in which we are or have been in this world which decide where we go, either to heaven or to hell. It's what we do with those circumstances and how we react to them which matters.

"The poor" wrote Swedenborg "come into heaven not on account of their poverty, but because of their life. Everyone's life follows him, whether he be rich or poor. There is no special mercy for one in preference to another. He who has lived well is received, while he who has not lived well is rejected." (*Heaven and Hell 364*).

It's our life which matters. How we have lived. What we chose to become while we were in this world... either selfish or unselfish; a person working for the happiness and well-being of others or only working and concerned for our own advancement.

And this leads us on to another misconception that people - that Christians, in particular - have, that you must be a Christian, or must have been a Christian; even that you must have belonged to a particular branch of the Christian Church; if you are to have any hope of entering heaven.

We easily forget that all people everywhere are created by God. We are all His children. Whether we are Chinese, Indian, South American, Fijian, or whatever. And God's purpose in creating us all is the same, that we should come to know and live the heavenly life in which there is the greatest happiness He can bestow upon us. God is working with every individual on earth to this end. There are no exceptions. None are more favoured than others. He in His love reaches out to all. And the thing is that He works in and through the different religious beliefs people have to do this. Wherever people are trying to live according to what they believe to be true, God can be with them and bring them into heaven after they die. Although they may never have learned of Christ or heard of the Christian religion here on earth they can and will be brought to know, love, and acknowledge the Lord in the spiritual world. There is almost an arrogance which has crept in with this idea that only Christians can and will be saved. And yet, we repeat, all are God's children. And for many, it is no fault of theirs that they never came to know the Lord in this world. Indeed, it can even be the fault of professing Christians that some are turned away. How useful it is for us to ponder these words of Jesus, the implications of which, as is so often the case, can go over our heads: "I tell you, many will come from the east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and nash their teeth." (Matthew 8: 11-12).

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