

## **Introducing The Swedenborg Program**

Hello. I'm Ian Arnold. And I'm Neville Jarvis.

This is The Swedenborg Program. Welcome, I hope you'll stay with us.

The likelihood is that you have never heard of The Swedenborg Program before; know nothing about us; and are asking questions about whether we are into politics, finance, advanced mathematics, medical science, alternative life-styles, or whatever. In fact we are into none of these. It's the deeper questions and the deeper issues of life which interest us and which this program is all about.

I recently watched a television program about a young and promising teenager who suffered brain damage in an accident. And I could only admire the heroic efforts being made by his family and friends to rehabilitate him and bring him back to a normal life and existence. But why? Why did it ever have to happen? Why was it allowed to happen? If there is a God, why didn't He prevent it?

That reminds me of yet another program on television about the almost unbelievable suffering, hardships, and cruelty, which allied soldiers - many, many Australians amongst them - endured during the Second World War in connection with the building of the Burma railway. It is, of course, just one of countless instances of man's inhumanity to man, but, again, the question comes at us, Why? If there is a God who cares; if there is a God of love, watching over human affairs, how can He allow such terrible things to take place?

Even so, this is not the only thing.

A few years ago an amazing book was published called "Life after Life". It became a best-seller within weeks and its contents are still talked about. In the book the author, Dr. Raymond Moody, recounts his conversations with patients who were involved in "near death" experiences. He spoke to many people who, clinically, had "died", and were revived again. And what so deeply impressed him was the similarity of the things they told him. "Despite the wide variation in the circumstances surrounding close calls with death and in the types of persons undergoing them", he wrote, "it remains true that there is a striking similarity among the accounts of the experiences themselves. In fact, the similarity among various reports are so great that one can easily pick out fifteen separate elements which recur again and again in the mass of narratives I have collected".

One of those fifteen elements is a feeling of peace and quiet at the point of death itself, and immediately afterwards. Dr. Moody quotes as an example, one woman who was resuscitated after a heart attack. "I began to experience the most wonderful feelings" she told him. "I couldn't feel a thing in the world except peace, comfort, ease - just quietness. I felt that all my troubles were gone, and I thought to myself, 'Well, how quiet and peaceful, and I don't hurt at all.'" (*Life After Life*: p29 ). And that, of course, is only the beginning. Patients spoke of moving rapidly through a long, dark tunnel. They had glimpses of relatives and friends who had already died, and most people spoke of their encounter with "a being of light", whom some referred to as Jesus, or as they imagined Jesus to be. All had a very changed attitude towards death afterwards.

Generally speaking, we know so little about death and about life after death. For the majority of people it is one of the great "unknowns". And yet this doesn't have to be. For one thing, teaching about the life after death is not as scarce in the Bible as we tend to think it is. And, for another, there's this book about it, called *Heaven and Hell*, written over 200 years ago, but full of the most fascinating information and detail about the life that awaits us when we die.

And talking about the Bible, here is something else about which people often confused. Are we to take the Bible literally, they ask? Are we to believe for example, that Creation took place exactly as it is set out and described in the Book of Genesis. Is the story of the Garden of Eden factual? Did Adam and Eve actually exist? Was there a Flood, as there is said to have been, so great that it covered the whole earth? And what are we to make of all those dry laws such as you find in the Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy? Why should we need to know about all the ancient battles and bloodshed which are described in the books of Joshua and Judges?

Just as with the question of accidents and misfortunes, and the matter of life after death, so too, we'll be talking about the Bible on this program. And our hope is that what we say and offer is really helpful to you. You see, the Bible is the Lord talking to us about ourselves. It seems on the surface that it's all about the world outside of us, and about people and events of long ago. In fact, the Bible is all about the world inside of us.

Just go back to the story of the Flood for a moment. Haven't you ever felt yourself being swept away by anger, or passion, or resentment, at different times? Of course you have! At other times evil thoughts have come "flooding" through our minds and we've really felt we were drowning in them. The Genesis story of the Flood is in our Bibles, so that we can learn from it the ways and means of "riding out" these floods. What the Lord is saying to us is that though such floods do come upon us and threaten to sweep us away, we can, if we are of a mind to do so, ride them out.

The Swedenborg Program has been heard on Sydney radio for something like 17 years. Let's be clear about it, that the Program is presented to highlight the teaching given in the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg from whom, obviously enough, it takes its name. It was his book, *Heaven and Hell*, which we spoke about earlier on and which meant so much to people such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the late Dr. Helen Keller, one of the best-known and most widely-respected women of our age. People in fact continue to be astonished at just how far-reaching Swedenborg's influence has been and continues to be.

Born in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1688, and the son of an eminent Lutheran bishop, Emanuel Swedenborg became one of the leading European scientists and philosophers of his day. He was always a man of deeply held, and quietly held, religious convictions and, at the age of 57 he largely abandoned his career as a scientist and a philosopher to devote himself to theology. Over the next 27 years, until his death at the age of 84, in 1772, he published some 30 substantial volumes on theological topics, and it is the teaching in those books which has not only influenced the likes of people already mentioned, but which is looked upon as the basis of a new Christianity.

In this talk today we could do no more than indicate a few of the areas explored in Swedenborg's theological writings. There are many, many more. And in the weeks ahead we hope to look at some of these with you. We'll be presenting refreshingly new and rationally appealing teaching on such subjects as the purpose of our life, the importance of our choices and decisions here, on the way in which the Lord relates to us and cares for us, on Marriage, and the future of mankind.

Helen Keller, wrote of the impact which this teaching had on her in the Preface to the J.M. Dent "Everyman" edition of Swedenborg's *True Christian Religion*, in these words:

"Since, I was sixteen years old, I have been a strong believer in the doctrines given to the world by Emanuel Swedenborg. It was his mission to teach men to listen to the inward voice rather than to opinions and disputations. After many years of reverent study of the Bible, I gratefully wonder if I am not more indebted to Swedenborg for the faith that turns my darkness into light than I have yet realized. I acknowledge my profound indebtedness to Emanuel Swedenborg for a richer interpretation of the Bible, a deeper understanding of the meaning of Christianity, and a precious sense of the Divine Presence in the world."

Swedenborg never attempted to form a Church and many of the most enthusiastic readers and receivers of the doctrines contained in his writings remained, and have remained, within the fold of the established and orthodox churches. A Church, however, was formed some 11 years after his death, in London. And, whilst small, it exists in many countries around the world, including Australia. In earlier times it was known as "The Church of the New Jerusalem". In more recent times it has become known, simply, as "The New Church". That Church remains small because it does not pressure people or in any way insist that it offers the only gate-way to salvation. One of the things which is insisted upon in Swedenborg's writings is that wherever people are trying to live according to what they believe God requires of them, however different that may be from what you and I believe God requires of us - they will be saved. So there is a fundamental respect for the beliefs and convictions of others.

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