

## **Is It Difficult Or Is It Easy To Live The Life That Leads To Heaven?**

Misunderstood as the statement can be and yet, at the same time, described as "one of the most wonderful and appealing passages in the Gospels" I would like to commence my talk by quoting the words of Jesus as they are now found in Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 2, the verses 28 to 30: "Come to me, all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

I quote these words because of the question they raise. Elsewhere, the opposite seems to be taught. Here it seems easy. There it is spoken of as being difficult. We want to know, Is it difficult or is it easy to live the life that leads to heaven? To serve the Lord in our lives in this world? To have Him, and to have His teaching as the centre of all things? To live according to Christian principles, values and standards?

Before we begin to answer the question there is another we ought to resolve first of all. Why serve the Lord? Why commit our lives to His ideals and purposes? Why should we be trying to live that life that leads to heaven anyway?

So often the accusation has been levelled against Christians that their first concern is themselves and their getting into heaven when they die. Their Christian living is mockingly said to have only self at the heart of it. And it is true, at the beginning this is so. Self, self interest, self preservation, are all involved and are motivating factors. But these are only a starting point. Things do not remain this way. Motives change as progress is made. And over a period of time we come to see that by living the life of heaven we best fit ourselves to serve the Lord's purposes in this world and to bring happiness to all those with whom we have contact.

Whereas at one time we shun an evil for fear of eventually being prevented from entering heaven, we come in due course to shun it because we know that in some way it diminishes our ability to function properly on behalf of others and to bring them happiness. As was once so eloquently said in this regard, "The inner object of the regenerating man, when shunning his evils, is not to perfect himself or to enjoy greater blessings in heaven, but to rid himself of the faults that prevent his service to the Lord and others." (Hugo Odhner, NCL. June 1967).

This, then, is the reason why we should be trying to live the life which in itself leads to heaven. But is it difficult or easy to do this? This is the question which is now before us. The teaching of Jesus in the Gospels on the subject, at least on the surface, doesn't make it clear. It might be thought, even to be contradictory. Here in Matthew Chapter 11, Jesus speaks of His yoke being easy, and His burden light. But teaching elsewhere suggests otherwise. Matthew 7, verses 13 and 14 read, "Enter by the narrow gate, since the road that leads to perdition is wide and spacious, and many take it; but it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Similarly, in Luke chapter 13, verse 24, "Strive to enter by the narrow door, because I tell you, many will try to enter and will not succeed".

Our question then is still very much with us. Is it difficult or is it easy to live the life that leads to heaven?

Important as the teaching is, and as the Lord while on earth indicated, Swedenborg wrote at length concerning the inborn tendencies all people hereditarily receive and the need we have to be born anew by the Lord. Very briefly, and from the work, *"The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine"*, paragraph 174: "Of his parents", it is said there, "a man is not born into spiritual life, but into natural life." We are born natural and with the tendency to love ourselves and the world more than God and our neighbour.

By means of repentance, reformation and regeneration we are re-born spiritual.

However, it would be foolish to underestimate what this involves. There is no question but that the things to which by nature we tend, give us our greatest pleasure and delight. Because we tend to the love of self, that which in any way panders to that love is what at first gives us pleasure. And these things are not easily surrendered. We wonder how anything else could be pleasurable.

Knowing the Lord's teaching on the one hand, and yet tending as we are at times to what is opposite to it on the other, conflict and temptation enters in. We become conscious of our failure to live up to the ideals we set ourselves and can see how heavily the natural life, or self and of the world, rests upon us.

It cannot, therefore be said to be easy to live the life that leads to heaven, for the fact is that in attempting to do so, practically everything within us rises up in opposition to the effort. Why then are there these suggestions otherwise? Why did the Lord talk of His yoke being easy and His burden being light?

In the first place the truth is that we so often compound the difficulty. It need not be as difficult as it often is and wouldn't be if we paid attention to certain things.

Training and environment is one of these things which help or hinder, make the task easier or more difficult. And here is where a parental responsibility enters into things. We cannot overlook the fact that, whilst there can always be change (and ultimate responsibility will rest with each individual him or her self), the directions of adult life are largely formulated during infancy and childhood. "Regeneration", it is said, "which is the implantation of the life of heaven, begins in a man from infancy". (*Arcana Caelestia* 9334). The influences which are brought to bear on the growing mind, and to which it is exposed, are enormously important, and it falls to us to do everything possible to see that these influences are conducive to helping children, in their adulthood, to enter upon the life which leads to heaven.

There is also, which is obvious, the increased difficulty which comes about because we have previously given into the evils which we now make up our mind to overcome. It is unquestionably easier to overcome a tendency than to have to set about expelling and disentangling something from our lives which has become habitual and part of us. Far too frequently we allow our evils to gain a hold on us and the difficulty of removing them becomes correspondingly greater.

And is not our difficulty also compounded by our procrastination? We are not sufficiently ruthless with evil when it suggests itself to us.

But just as important as these factors are which cannot but involve us in more difficulty and effort, as it is, we need to look again at these words of the Lord which have been taken to suggest an easy way, but which, in reality, do not do so.

We do not question that the Lord's yoke is easy. We do not question that a life lived in His Service is so much easier and more straightforward than a life lived with self at the centre and with all the fears and anxieties that this must involve.

Worrying about what people will think. How we will 'go over'. Whether by doing something our reputation will be enhanced or whether it will suffer. (Slave of selfish and self regarding goals and objectives in life, unreal images of himself, as the unregenerate man is, life is full of tensions and burdens for him). But this is not to say that the actual giving up of the old yoke will itself be easy. Certainly the Lord said His yoke is easy. And we can see how it must be. But He did not say that the process of shedding our old goals and loves and motives would be easy. That's where the difficulty lies. And here is where all the struggle and effort is required.

I believe one of the things which can be safely said of these times in which we are now living is that this is very much an age of restlessness. And since we are talking about human nature it is true to say that a kind of restlessness is characteristic of every age, but perhaps more noticeable and more publicised today. People are restless for recognition. Restless to leave a mark. Restless to have things; to better their living standards, to increase their incomes, to have overseas holidays, and so on. Restless and anxious to make an impression, to be seen in a good light. This is so of us all before regeneration commences. It is the rare person who is really content. We erect gods and pursue objectives which keep us in a state of continual restlessness and anxiety.

By contrast the Lord's way is an easier way. We are not going to worry about whether we are rich and successful, are important and noticed, what people say about us and whether they agree with us. Our concern and our happiness will be to live our lives as the Lord urges us to live them, recognising how secondary and relatively unimportant these other things are.

The Lord's way is the easier way. Where difficulty enters in, is in the transfer or the change over, from the self-orientated life to the life of love and service to others. That's where effort, persistence, a considerable amount of hard work and resistance from our lower natures, are all to be expected.

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