

Straightening Out Misconceptions About The Life After Death (1)

It is interesting, indeed, it is intriguing how often it is said by scholars and Christian theologians that the Bible has practically nothing to teach us about the life after death. Little, if nothing, they say, is said there, whether we're talking about the Bible in general or the teaching of Jesus in particular. Understandably, and having this assumption as its starting point, the Christian Church tends to be vague, indefinite and uncertain about the matter. If you press the point you will probably be told that we are not meant to know, and that the existence of the spiritual world and of a life after death, (about which there is admitted uncertainty), can be left until we get there.

However it is wrong to say that the Bible has nothing to say about the life after death, in particular, that Jesus Himself had little or nothing to say about the subject. The truth is that He had a great deal to say about it. In all His teaching and approach to people He was looking towards it. He proclaimed in unequivocal terms that His Kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). He urged us to prepare for it and to make use of our opportunities while in this world to do so. Why else, for example, would He tell us, not to lay up treasures on earth, but to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven? (Matthew 6: 19-20). And again, why else would He warn us, "Not every one who says to me 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21).

By no stretch of the imagination can it be said that Jesus was talking about this world or any kingdom people may have thought He planned to set up here. Jesus was talking about heaven in the sense of something distinct from this world. Like we've seen, He spoke of the importance of our lives as we have chosen to live them in this world, as having a tremendous bearing on the situation in which we find ourselves when we die.

There was an occasion when He was able to point out the most needed qualities for entrance into heaven. It was when the disciples came to him, asking, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" "And calling to Him a child, He put him in the midst of them, and said, 'Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'" (Matthew 18: 1-4).

When we stop and think about these things we wonder how it can possibly be said that the Bible says virtually nothing about life after death or that Jesus Himself had practically nothing to say about it. He had a great deal to say about it.

What happens here, as happens in so many cases, is that our own convictions and certainties blind us to what is being said so that we simply fail to see it. People become convinced that Jesus said nothing about the life after death or that the Bible says nothing about the life after death. They have heard others say it and so sure do they become that this is so, that they fail to see such teaching even when it plainly stares at them from the pages of Scripture.

Some of the things Jesus said are even more obvious than those things we have looked at so far. There is His famous declaration to Martha when they were in discussion about the death of her brother, Lazarus. Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life: he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." (John 11.25).¹ And a little further on, still in John's Gospel, the beginning of Chapter 14, "Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And when I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also."

On this subject of the life after death we by no means have to restrict ourselves to the teaching of the Lord in the Gospels. For all its strangeness, the Book of Revelation touches upon it. Indeed, it does so in several places. At the same time certain of the things said in the Book of Revelation are the basis of misconceptions or 'myths' that have grown up in relation to the life after death, two of which we thought, we would look at with you and endeavour to straighten out. One is the life of idleness in the spiritual world, or heaven, which from a casual reading, seems to be suggested at one point. The other is the matter of judgement, which on the basis of what is said in Revelation Chapter 20, strikes people as a rather fearsome experience, sometimes few, if any of us, would really look forward to.

But let's take up this suggestion that seems to be there about idleness, first of all. It comes to us in Chapter 14, verse 13, which reads "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth'. Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them."

Is life in heaven a life of idleness? Could we stand it for long if it was? The fact is, of course, that we couldn't. It sounds attractive at first, just as retirement sounds attractive to a person who had worked all their adult life. But as the person who retires knows only too well, he or she can tolerate idleness for a short while and enjoy it. But the time soon comes when they want to be active and useful again, even if not working in the sense of going out to a job each day. People have been known to shrivel up inside and die through idleness. The human spirit here on earth or in heaven after death comes to loathe sheer idleness and yearns to be active in some worthwhile way.

Could it be though that there has been a misunderstanding of the word "labours" here and what is meant by it? And the answer to this question is 'Yes', there is and has been. People have tended to think that what is meant is the day to day responsibilities of their employment and the demands that are made on them through that employment. "Blessed indeed", says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them". Our day to day employment is not what is being talked about at this point at all. The 'work', or 'labour', referred to here is the work or labour involved in our reformation and regeneration. We work or labour to overcome our selfishness. We 'work' or 'labour' in this world, or we should do, to overcome our tendencies to want to put people down or publicly belittle them. It's an effort sometimes to be merciful and forgiving towards someone who has really got under our skin and annoyed us. And we have to work at it and labour to do so.

People in heaven no longer have to work or labour in this way. The earlier efforts called for to overcome selfish ways and inclinations are no longer required. The conflicts and temptations they went through are a thing of the past. This is what is different about life in heaven, that to all intents and purposes personal reformation and regeneration is complete. The battles have been fought. The struggles endured. In his book, *The Apocalypse Revealed*, Swedenborg wrote, with reference to the words, "they shall rest from their labours" that they refer to, and are to be understood as meaning, "that those who afflict their soul and crucify their flesh in this world for the sake of the Lord and of life eternal, shall have peace in the Lord". (para. 640). The thing is these words are not saying anything about idleness whatever. Life in heaven is not a life of idleness. It is a life of usefulness and service, people there all the time striving to be of service to each other.

Well, that's one of the misconceptions or "myths" we were going to look at. The other one was the question of judgement. Revelation Chapter 20, verses 11 and 12, read: "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it; from His presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done."

The books from which people are judged in the spiritual world are not, as has been thought, books of pages of print on them, but the interiors of our minds.

"They are called books" wrote Swedenborg, "because in the interiors of the mind of every one are written all the things that he thought, intended, spoke, and did in this world from the will or love, and thence from the understanding or faith." (*Apocalypse Revealed* 867).

Day by day we are, as it were, writing a book about ourselves. The things we deliberately choose and make our own are, so to speak, written up in this book which is nothing other than the deeper recesses of our minds where in fact is the real person each of us is. When we die and enter the spiritual world our true nature and character comes to the surface. And the book we wrote here is revealed in the spiritual world for all to see. Other people come to see us there as we really are. There is no more hiding or deception like we can get away with here in this world. And, with our true nature on the surface and revealed we, in a very real sense, judge ourselves.

We will automatically want to be with people who see things and who approach life as we do, whether in heaven or in hell. We are not "sent" to either place. So naturally will we move in one direction, or the other, that we will probably not know that the "judgement" process is taking place.

From this side of things we will never know all there is to be known about the spiritual world, heaven or the life after death generally. But we can know a great deal. And we don't have to live under the misapprehensions and "myths" which have for so long surrounded the subject. In the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, new light is shed by which we are able to see things as they really are.

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