

What happens when I die? - Part 1.

Happening as it is all the time, and knowing that we ourselves will one day be involved, there will be few of us, I imagine, who have not paused at some time to think about death and to wonder what happens to people when they die. We are here today and, as it were, gone tomorrow. But gone where? We have possibly heard people speak of a life after death but cannot comprehend where it can be and what sort of a life is lived there. Many hope for a re-union with a loved one. But is this possible? Can we be sure? Can we even know? There seems to be so many imponderables and so much uncertainty.

Certain things are said in the Bible which partly answer some of the questions we ask but by no means answer them all. The Lord spoke of His Father's house, for example, in which there are "many mansions" (John 14). On another occasion He reminded His listeners that "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." (Matthew 22, 32). He spoke of the importance of laying up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6, 20) and warned that mere knowledge of God and token acknowledgement of His teaching without the effort to obey it would not qualify a person for admission there. ""Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7, 21). And possibly best known of all His statements on life after death is found in John's Gospel, chapter 11: "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

Even so, confusion persists and, as was said earlier, despite such teaching, many of our questions remain unanswered. People have taken the Lord's words to mean different things and find other statements elsewhere in the Bible which, on the surface, seem to say other things. There is an obvious need for further teaching. The Lord Himself said there would be. (John 16,12). And such teaching there is in the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, especially in his book, "*Heaven and Hell*", the most widely read of them all.

"It has been granted me" wrote Swedenborg, "to be with angels and to talk with them person to person." (*Heaven and Hell* 1).

He had the remarkable experience of being allowed into the spiritual world; an experience which was granted him not to satisfy some idle curiosity on his part but in order that he might serve as the means through which a new revelation about life after death could be made known to mankind. As time went on he could write of "the daily experiences of many years" by which it had been proved to him "that a person's spirit, after release from the body, is a person and in similar form." (*The Last Judgement*, 17). He wrote of the astonishment of many people when they awakened in the spiritual world (ibid 16), and of the happiness and joy which people can know there.

Before we look into these things in any detail however there are certain things about ourselves and about our being here which it is important to understand. Above all else we are spiritual beings clothed at first with a physical or natural body for the duration of our life in this world. The real person which you are is that which lives in that body, and that person cannot die. We are born into this world in order to develop an ability to live in heaven. This is why we are living here. Human life has this purpose behind it. It was never intended that we should remain here forever and in time the body will die. But not the spirit. Not the distinct individual and person we are. The Lord intended progress. The death of the body is an orderly thing; an experience which under normal circumstances is to be neither feared nor resented.

This world is a world of contrasts; of good and evil; of truth and falsity; a melting pot for the moulding of character. We are born into this world in order to have the opportunity to choose what we want to become or, as we put it a moment ago, to develop an ability to live in heaven. We haven't got that ability at first and so we must develop it. The Lord created every person to live in heaven to eternity, and to be happy there. But it is up to us to fit ourselves to live there. No person goes to heaven who has not got something of heaven in himself before he goes.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks people come across in comprehending the prospect of a life after death is the fact that they cannot 'place' it. They have found no satisfactory answer to the question 'Where is heaven?' There are vague ideas as to a journey being involved, but no one knows where to. It is a fact, however, that when we die we do not go anywhere. The spiritual world is an inner and higher dimension of consciousness. So long as we are in this world we are conscious of people and things here. But when we die we awaken to consciousness at this deeper level.

We 'switch off' consciousness at one level, so to speak, and 'switch on' at another. The spiritual world is rightly thought of as another dimension of consciousness. It is both within and around us. We are already in unconscious association with it. When we die it becomes a conscious association. We become aware of what, before, we were unaware. And it is this proximity of the spiritual world and of those who are there which explains the feeling people have from time to time of a loved one who has died, being very near.

Men and women are essentially spiritual beings; a distinct personality and individual; clothed with a physical body, at the death of which he/she goes on living, human in shape and form as before. At first people do not know that they have died. The old idea of the soul or spirit has been of something ethereal and without form, some kind of a wisp of wind. But this is not so. The soul or spirit is the real person, human in every way. "From all my experience which is now of several years" wrote Swedenborg, "I can say with full confidence that in their form, angels are completely human. They have faces, eyes, ears, chests, arms, hands, and feet. They see each other, hear each other, and talk to each other." (*Heaven and Hell* - 75).

Elsewhere, he wrote that "As 'spirit-people,' we enjoy every outer and inner sense we enjoyed in the world. We see the way we used to, we hear and talk the way we used to; we smell and taste and feel things when we touch them the way we used to; we want, wish, crave, think, ponder, are moved, love, and intend the way we used to." (*Heaven and Hell* 461).

Death, especially when it has occurred in old age when the body has become frail and faculties are heavily impaired, marks, in a very real and genuine way, the liberation of a person who then, in the spiritual world, can develop the full potential which lies within them and live their lives on a far richer level. There, their inner worth and basic character will increasingly impress itself on their features and if good and essentially unselfish people, they will find a home in some particular community of the heavens, one of the many mansions of which the Lord spoke, where they will live to eternity. Judgement, of which so much has been said in the past, is a process whereby people come to terms with themselves as they really are and seek out others, either in heaven or in hell, who are like-minded and with whom they feel at ease.

At the outset I spoke of the question which we are bound to have asked ourselves at some time or another 'What happens when I die?' And the answer is that we do not die. The body dies, but we ourselves do not. We go on living in the spiritual world which is a real world and to which the Lord has destined us from the beginning. Life is very much an on-going thing and death marks the end of one stage of it and the beginning of another. At first we shall neither feel nor know any difference and will have to be told. And maybe like others, of whom Swedenborg wrote, and who had obviously previously doubted, we shall be amazed and delighted.

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