

Death and Resurrection

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Our text this morning is those immortal words spoken by the Lord to Martha, sister of Lazarus:

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (John 11:25).

Death is a subject best confronted when it is not present, for then the mind is able to think about it with quietude, and so examine it from many angles. It is a certainty that each one of us will die and each one of us will be affected by the death of other people. To a great degree, our belief in a life after death defines how we respond to death.

To believe in the Lord is also to believe in a life after death. These two beliefs go hand-in-hand. In one sense, we can say that by believing in a life after death we are also believing in the power and omnipotence of the Lord: His power because He can undo that which no one else can undo—death, and His omnipotence because the Lord releases each and every person from the bonds of death.

There is an old saying that no one can get out of this world alive! We must all die, and, sad as that eventuality may seem at the time, the only way we can make sense of it is by believing the Lord’s words: those who believe in Him can never die. In the Word the Lord shows His power over death. He raised Lazarus from the tomb even though he had been dead for four days.

Reflect on that miracle for a moment. Jesus was summoned to Bethany because Lazarus was ill. When Jesus heard this, He said, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” These words are significant. Instead of going to Lazarus immediately, He waited until it seemed too late—Lazarus had died and been buried. But the Lord allowed Lazarus to die in order to demonstrate His power over death. He raised Lazarus back to natural life to illustrate how people are raised into spiritual life.

The Lord, as He said later to the Sadducees, is the God of the living, not the God of the dead. In the Gospel of John, He said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36). At another time the Lord said, “The kingdom of God is within you.” These Biblical passages clearly show that the Lord’s kingdom cannot be found on the physical plane; it is a kingdom of spirit, existing within us. In the doctrines of the New Church we are taught that the Lord created all of us to become citizens of His kingdom. Each of us is destined to heaven or, if we choose it, to hell.

Death, then, is a natural conclusion to our life in this world, and it introduces us into spiritual life. The only reason our bodies live is because the spirit lives within them. Our spirit is what thinks and feels, the part of us that moves us to act. This spirit draws its life from the Lord, and, because it does that, it can never die. Only the body which houses the spirit in this world dies, for

our bodies are made of matter, with no life of their own. At death the body is left behind, and the spirit is resurrected into a new life.

Many theories have evolved over the thousands of years that people have contemplated death. In ancient times the after-life was believed to be a sort of gray underworld; the Greeks called it *Hades*, the Jews *Sheol*. Very little was known about it. In Christian times the theorizing has continued. Some believe that people stay in the grave until the Last Judgment when they will be raised again, physically, on this earth. Few believe in any sort of spiritual resurrection. Yet this is what the Lord teaches in the Word. In Hosea we read, “Come and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up.” After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight” (Hosea 6:1-2).

The Lord Himself, when asked for a sign of His power, referred to the sign of Jonah, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). This sign came true when the Lord, crucified on Good Friday, was resurrected on Easter Sunday. However, it was not until the Lord called His servant Emanuel Swedenborg to experience the spiritual world and write his experiences down that the Lord fully revealed the spiritual world to the human race. Swedenborg’s revelations set aside the theories of the past. What we are shown in the doctrines of the New Church is a marvelous view of the life to come.

Death, we are told, is a continuation of life, not physical life but spiritual life. The process of dying can be compared to leaving one room and entering into another. At times it has been compared to a worm’s wrapping itself into a cocoon. What emerges is no longer a worm but a butterfly, beautiful and free.

For many people, in spite of the assurances given about death, the subject still contains fear: fear of the unknown, fear of separation from loved ones, fear of punishment. The doctrines show us that these fears are unfounded. The spiritual world is the Lord’s kingdom; going there is like moving to another country. Because the Lord is merciful, He cushions the transition as much as possible.

Swedenborg was allowed to experience the process of waking up in the spiritual world, and he tells us that it is both a gentle and a pleasant experience. A person who has recently died is put into the care of angels, who gradually awaken him or her. By about the third day after dying the person is fully awake and ready to begin a new life.

People in the other life are often amazed by what they see. First, people are struck by the similarity between the spiritual world and the natural. This is true to such a degree that the spirit—

...imagines that he is still in the world, indeed that he is still within his physical body, insomuch that when he is told he is a spirit he is absolutely dumbfounded. He is dumbfounded because, for one thing, he is still in every way a person as regards sensations, desires, and thoughts, and for another, he did not during his lifetime believe in the existence of the spirit, or...that the spirit could possibly be such as his experience now proves. (*Arcana Coelestia* 320)

The second amazing thing about the next world is that people are still people. Newcomers there discover that they still have a body, still have sensations similar to those in this world. The only difference between their spiritual and natural bodies is that the spiritual body is more alive, more in tune with them than ever before.

So the spirit begins life in the next world conscious of the external similarities of the two worlds. But there are some major differences as well: the spiritual world is a world of the mind, thus it is affected by the mind of the spirit. We can see the reality of this in the impact that thoughts have on the people there. When someone in the spiritual world thinks of a person, then that person appears before his or her eyes. In this way the new spirit comes into contact with those who have died earlier.

But the impact of the mind goes far beyond simply providing contact with friends and relatives; it actually determines what the spirit's immediate environment will be like. In this world our external environment is only slightly affected by our moods, loves and hates. For example, a person who loves wide outdoor spaces may feel claustrophobic in a forest. The environment elicits a response from a person. But in the next world it is the other way around: the person's feelings and thoughts elicit a response from the environment. Thus a person who loves wide-open spaces will find him or herself in such places.

Mostly, however, our thoughts and feelings determine whether our spiritual environment is good or evil. An evil person, one who chooses selfishly and is only concerned with self, will find that his or her environment reflects this selfishness: it may be hard, dry, barren, cruel, or hostile. In other words, all the qualities of selfishness will be depicted in the landscape. Interestingly, such a person will find those kinds of surroundings attractive, will even enjoy them. This is the major difference between heaven and hell: heaven is a reflection of a person's love for good, while hell reflects the opposite.

Spirits feel so at home in their spiritual environment because that environment is the result of their life in this world. Our natural life is a preparation for spiritual life—the thoughts, feelings, attitudes and habits we form and foster are all part of the mental world in which we live. A gloomy person may see life as depressing, sad or dull. In time, that outlook becomes so habitual that the person can't see life from any other viewpoint. In the next life, those thoughts and feelings become real, and the person no longer wishes to even begin to change.

The message given to us, therefore, is to really consider our deaths. Picture ourselves moving into another world where our innermost thoughts and feelings become the reality of our lives. What would that be like to eternity? Fortunately, while we are in this world we are given the opportunity to re-adjust ourselves, to repent and reform, so that our inner reality becomes more heavenly, more balanced, and happier.

When we are not immediately affected by death, the spiritual world can seem a long way off. In the hustle and bustle of daily life, our final home in heaven or hell hardly seems to be very important. But it is important. The spiritual world is not something "out there." It is within us.

When we die, we will effectively move from one room into another. Our consciousness will be interrupted for a mere three days!

If we believe in the Lord, then we must also believe in the life after death, and that belief must have more of an impact on our lives than simply feeling comforted at a funeral. The Lord has given us this information for a greater reason than mere curiosity. He has given it to us for use, so that we may learn to put aside selfish and hellish things and instead turn to Him as the source of life for a spiritual resurrection—even while we are still alive in this world.

If we turn to Him, then we can take to heart His words to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.” *Amen.*

Lesson: John 11:1-44