

THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

Lessons: *John 11*

For so many in the world, the subject of what to expect after death has been merely a great *question*. How fortunate we are in the New Church to have the great *answer*. The book *Heaven and Hell* says at the beginning that many ask, “Who has come back from that world and told us?” And doubts trouble even “the simple in heart and the simple in faith.” It is for this reason that it was granted to Swedenborg to see and hear, to converse with angels, and to describe it all “in the hope that ignorance may thus be enlightened and unbelief dispelled” (*Heaven and Hell* 1).

What a very common thing death is. If you keep in mind how many people there are on earth, you will realize that many people die every single day. “Whoever goes into a calculation will find that several thousands die every day” (*Heaven and Hell* 415).

It is a normal part of the story of human life. We know that when the Lord was in the world, He brought back three people from the other world—that is, brought them back to life in this world. One was a twelve-year-old girl. With her parents and some disciples watching, the Lord took her by the hand and said, “Maiden, I say to you, arise.” In another case, the Lord brought back to life the son of a widow as he was being carried to the grave. But the most dramatic such event was the last one—the raising of His beloved friend, Lazarus.

Hearing of his death, the Lord came to see his grave. As we read in verse 38, “It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.” A crowd of people were watching, including the two sisters of the man who lay buried there. They hesitated to take the stone away from a grave that had been closed for four days, but the Lord said that “the glory of God” would be seen. And when he called, “Lazarus, come forth,” the man walked into the light.

Many believed that day, and that family was brought together with rejoicing. The Lord, who restored a twelve year old girl to her parents and who restored a son to his mother, did these things that we might know about them. And we should now know that He is always bringing loved ones together after death, but not in this world. He brings them together in the other world where life has a new beginning. By making this known to us, He is telling us:

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.”

Because there are so many examples of people who have come close to death and who have even been clinically “dead” for a short time, a number of books have been produced that tell what some of them have remembered.

A beautiful book of this kind is *Life After Life*, by Dr. Raymond Moody. He noticed that the stories people have told of their experience often have common or similar ingredients. We can look at a few.

1) Many people speak of seeing light which does not dazzle or hurt their eyes, but has an unearthly brightness. It is interesting to compare this to what is said in *Arcana Coelestia* 186 “Eternal life is represented to a person who is going into the other world by a bright white light that becomes of a beautiful golden tinge.”

2) Many have seemed to be clinically dead for a very *short* time, but they often recollect a surprising amount. Two things may be noted about the shortness of time. The first is that it is possible in the other world to communicate without words and “express more in a minute *Heaven and Hell* 240, 576).

The more important thing to note is that Swedenborg’s experience of the other world was granted by the Lord over a period of a *long* time. This is one of the ways in which it differs so much from the fragments of near death experiences.

Swedenborg testifies that this was “not merely for a day or a week (*Arcana Coelestia* 70). It was “the daily experience of many years” (*Heaven and Hell* 456); “the living experience of so many years” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8939). Indeed, *Heaven and Hell* was not written until the experience had gone on for “thirteen years” (*Heaven and Hell* 1). And the total testimony of the Writings comes from an experience granted to Swedenborg for twenty-seven years” (*True Christian Religion* 851).

3) Another difference is in the matter of *remembering*. Dr. Moody points out that there are probably many aspects of a person’s experience that they no longer remember. The Writings do say that what happens just after death is often like a forgotten sleep. (See *True Christian Religion* 797.) In fact, once a spirit who had forgotten, later remembered and said, “I saw heaven above, and I heard angels there uttering ineffable things; but that was when I first came here” (*True Christian Religion* 80). (The word “ineffable” means *beyond description*.) Because it was Divinely intended that Swedenborg’s experience should be written down, he had angelic help in recalling things to memory. (See *Conjugal Love* 73.) And we notice that it is said, “I was brought into a state . . . nearly of the dying; but with the inner life and thought remaining, so that I might perceive and *retain in the memory* the things that happened to me, and that happen to those who are resuscitated from the dead” (*Heaven and Hell* 449).