

THE THING WE CALL DEATH CAN BE AS SUDDEN AS A THIEF

by Rev. Donald L. Rose

An urgent theme of the Gospels concerns a coming event in our lives. When will it happen? Ah, that is the whole point. It will come at a time when we do not expect it.

Jesus said, "Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is." This is from Mark chapter 13 which ends in this stark fashion: "Watch, therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning—lest coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!"

I believe this is talking about the event which we label as "death." It is that momentous point in life when we make the transition from this world to the next.

For various psychological reasons we easily lapse into a kind of denial of this event. It is like falling asleep when we should be watching.

We need it to be conveyed to us in urgent and vivid terms.

Why is it compared to the coming of a thief? Because we need the dramatic to get our attention. "Know this," said Jesus emphatically, "If the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched."

If you knew precisely when a thief would come to your house, you would be ready. "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Luke 12:40).

"If you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you" (Revelation 3:3). "Behold I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches . . ." (Rev. 16:15).

Theologian Emanuel Swedenborg explores this biblical theme. The bottom line, according to Swedenborg, is that we should be *getting ready all the time*. We should conduct ourselves just as if we did know.

Swedenborg quotes Matthew 24:44 which speaks of one coming as a thief "at an hour when you do not expect." He says, "This means that if a person knew the hour of his death he would get himself ready." But, says Swedenborg, if we *knew* we would act "from fear." What we do from fear does not remain and become part of us, but what is done from a willing love "does remain; therefore we should be getting ready all the time."

That theme of “getting ready all the time” translates out to some excellent rules of life. Live today as if it were your last day in this world. Or treat another person today as if it were that person’s last day. For you do not know when the transition will come.

Even an anticipated death will frequently have an unexpected facet. We see family members come from a distance as a loved one nears the end. They know the event is to be “soon,” and yet the moment itself often comes unexpectedly.

It is not an event to be feared. Yes, its unexpectedness may be compared to the coming of a thief. But in itself it is blessed. It is the fulfillment of a promise by Him who said, “I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you.”

As you live your life, stay spiritually awake, on the watch for that important event. “Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching” (Luke 12:37).

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