



**OUR DAILY BREAD**  
Resources for Spiritual Questers

# *The Road To the Cross*

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*“When the Lord was in the world, he brought everything in the heavens and the bells back into order.”<sup>1</sup>*

-Emanuel Swedenborg, *Apocalypse Explained* §405:23

If we lift the Palm Sunday story out of its context, it offers us a striking image of accepting the Lord into our lives. He entered Jerusalem like a king returning from battle. Had this in fact been the situation, at least in pre-Roman times, he would have been followed by his army, carrying the spoils of war and leading the captives who would soon be sold as slaves. Jerusalem would be in for a year of peace and prosperity. The king himself would be at his best, surely relieved that a battle had been won, confident that he was secure on his throne, basking in the admiration of his subjects.

If, that is, we lift the story out of its context. We could scarcely ask for a more dramatic example of the distortion that ensues when we lift a story out of its context. The Lord was not returning from battle; rather, he was facing the greatest battle of his earthly life. He must have been fully, painfully aware of the shallowness of the enthusiasm that surrounded him. Everyone loves a winner.

We may be sure that in his human nature he did not know the future in any detail, but he knew full well that he was not the kind of Messiah the crowds were hailing, and he must surely have anticipated the depth and violence of their reaction when their high hopes were dashed to the ground. It was one thing to be part of the crowds that cheered the Titanic when she sailed on her maiden voyage; she was a technological marvel, the biggest, safest ship ever built. It is quite another thing to think of those crowds knowing the actual outcome of that voyage.

What the crowds expected was no less than the millennium, the fulfillment of ancient prophecies, the dawn of a new era. Think of it for a moment. There had been other rebellions against foreign occupation. The Maccabees had actually succeeded in gaining the nation’s independence from

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<sup>1</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Apocalypse Explained*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1994.

the Seleucids, an independence that lasted for about a century until the Romans ended it. Judah Maccabee, the prime figure in the triumph, stood squarely in the tradition of the Old Testament judges. He, like them, was a leader raised up to gather a militia that would repel some specific threat. Jesus was no ordinary military leader, though. He was a sage and a miracle worker, more like a prophet than a judge. There is a very significant story in the first chapter of John's gospel about a questioning of John the Baptist. The question was, "Who are you?" The answer was not "My name is John."

The answer was, "I am not the Messiah, or Elijah, or a second Moses; I am the voice crying in the wilderness, announcing the coming of the Lord" (John 1:19-23). John the Baptist had been beheaded, but here, in Jesus of Nazareth, was someone whose credentials were far more impressive. He was of royal blood, for one thing. He was a potential king. He taught with authority, like Moses. He worked miracles like Elisha. And now, he came into the city in the style of a victorious king, and did so just before the Passover, the celebration of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

Here, in other words, was Moses and David and Elisha all rolled into one. Now translate this into our own times, to the turn of this millennium. Think of the Ugandans who apparently expected the end of the age, and who made it happen for themselves when it was not made for them. There was apparently a charismatic leader, someone who had gained the complete trust of hundreds of desperate people. There was a promise that was passionately believed and that could not possibly be fulfilled. Why—why on earth, in fact—would the Lord deliberately raise hopes to a fever pitch when they could only be brutally demolished? The answer, I believe, can be found in the principle stated with painful clarity in Divine Providence: "Evils cannot be removed unless they come out in the open" (§ 278a).<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing inherently evil about wanting peace and prosperity. It is surely much saner, much better, than wanting war and poverty, much better than apathy. The evil enters when this relatively external good is more important to us than deeper values— when, for example, a tyrant "pacifies" his country by eliminating the opposition, or when we build prosperity on the backs of child labor, as we did in Victorian times, in the era we associate with strong family values.

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<sup>2</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Providence*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2003.

A simple example may serve to get the point across. How many people would flock to the streets for someone who promised to deliver us from our own moral and spiritual weaknesses? We seem far more interested in being saved from our circumstances than in being saved from ourselves.

From the beginning of his ministry, the Lord had made clear what the focus of his good news was. It was not the kingdom of Israel; it was the kingdom of heaven. Not many people were really interested. I'm reminded of a situation some years ago in which a teenage boy was feeling very out of it because all his friends seemed to have girlfriends, and he didn't. He learned that one evening the girls had gotten together and had been discussing boys. All had agreed that he was the nicest of the lot.

Apparently, though, at that point in their lives they weren't looking for "nice." In *The Fountain of Age*, Betty Friedan tells of two women whose first marriages failed and whose second marriages succeeded. Both women said much the same thing: "The second time, I married someone I wouldn't have looked at twice when I was younger." Again, it is not that what they were looking for at first was inherently evil. It was just that they were radically exaggerating its importance. Perhaps the only way they could find this out was by experience, by having their unrealistic hopes raised up, and then giving reality the last word. It may not be the most welcome message, but we must not forget that the result in each of these instances was that extraordinary blessing, a happy marriage, which was all the more treasured because of the contrast with what had gone before.

There is no point in raising those unrealistic hopes unless there is a blessing to be gained. People who have been hurt by those they love are bound to be wary of opening themselves to more hurt, wary of opening their hearts. It is the purpose of revelation not simply to awaken us to a joy that may lie beyond the pain, but also to show us where to look for the promise that will not fail. When we ask where we can put our complete trust, the answer is of course theologically obvious. We could almost open the Bible or any volume of Swedenborg's writings at random and find it. For that matter, we could probably open any volume of Aquinas or Augustine or Luther or Calvin, we could open the Qur'an or the Book of Mormon, and find much the same answer. If we would look for perfect

security, we can look only to divinity. In fact, it is divinity itself that is responsible for this measure of unanimity, providing in every religion the guidance its believers need for their part in the purpose of creation, for the building of the heavenly community. It is the beauty of that community that makes the whole trip worthwhile—even or perhaps especially that last leg of the journey that includes the triumphal entry, the Last Supper, and the cross.

That is what Swedenborg means when he says, “When ‘the Mount of Olives’ is associated with the Lord, it means divine love.” What impelled the Lord to make that fateful ride? We can have some idea of what was going on in the minds and hearts of the crowd, because we are not all that different from them, but what was going on in the Lord’s mind and heart? We need not guess at the answer. He was coming into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. He was coming from his love of us. The crowds were individuals who were infinitely dear to him, as we ourselves are. They had eyes that were blinded by their focus on material goals. If only their sight could be opened, if only the blinders could be taken off, they could see the beauty of the kingdom of heaven. Then they would be willing, eager, to sell all they had for that pearl of great price. Until then, they would cling to their possessions and never know what they were missing. Sometimes you have to care very deeply about someone else to say “No.” It hurts. It is far easier to say “Yes,” but it is easy for the wrong reasons.

Just this past week, one of my students called my attention to an image tucked away in the treatment of the wilderness wandering in Swedenborg’s *Secrets of Heaven*. It seems that the dew that fell in the morning, leaving behind the manna when it evaporated, was an image of something called “the truth of peace.” That truth, we are told, comes from the Lord and “because it is inmost, flows subtly into truth that is below it and brings that lower truth to life... Once that lower truth has been brought to life, the truth of peace rises up—that is, it seems to disappear—and what holds our attention is the truth that has gained life from it. This is how the truth of faith is born” (*Secrets of Heaven* §8456)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Secrets of Heaven*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2012.

This needs to be put together with the definition of “peace” offered in the previous paragraph. “Peace has within itself a trust in the Lord, that he is in control of everything and is taking care of everything and that he is leading toward a good outcome. When we are ‘in’ this faith, then we are at peace. We are not afraid of anything; no worry about the future disquiets us. “

As he rode into Jerusalem, the Lord knew that the cross lay ahead, but he also knew that the resurrection lay beyond the cross. He had told his disciples about it beforehand (see, for example, Mark 10:33f.). He knew this with enough depth of conviction to carry him through that appalling week. We can scarcely imagine a beauty radiant enough to shine through that darkness.

We can scarcely imagine the sheer strength of “the truth of peace.” The definition of “peace” is not left standing alone. It leads directly to the following statement: “We come into this state to the extent that we are caught up in love for the Lord. The state of peace banishes everything evil, especially our reliance on ourselves” (Secrets of Heaven §8455). We have come full circle.

To love the Lord is to be drawn toward the beauty of that divine humanity, of the image in which and for which we ourselves were created. To be drawn toward that beauty is to be stirred into motion on the path of regeneration that is our faint echo of the Lord’s glorification. It is to long and to work for the time when this church will represent that beauty to the community that surrounds it, the community on which it depends.

Amen.