

Swedenborg Theology Course Session 5

What Shall We Be After Death?

Rev. Jonathan Mitchell
Swedenborgian Church of San Diego

We Live in Two Worlds

As we have noted in previous sessions, Swedenborg, through his spiritual experiences, came to believe firmly in the reality of the Spiritual World. In fact for him, the Spiritual World is primary, and the material world exists only as an expression or concrete manifestation of the Spiritual World. We are ourselves participate in that dual reality—we live simultaneously in two worlds: the Spiritual World and the natural world.

All of us, therefore, are spiritual beings right now. Our conscious awareness, our thoughts, feelings, and memories all reside in the spirit. Any conscious choice or decision we make is made by the spirit. Therefore, it is our spirits that make us who we are as unique individual human beings. Our spirits dwell in the spiritual world, even during our natural earthly lives.

As spiritual beings we have material bodies that are part of the natural world. Swedenborg says that we are "spirits clothed in bodies." Our intentional physical actions take place because our bodies respond to what is taking place in our spirits. All our thoughts, feelings and actions arise in our spirits first and then are expressed through our bodily actions.

The History of Human Consciousness

We are all alive in the natural and the spiritual world simultaneously. But usually we are not aware of the spiritual world during our bodily lives. As we noted when discussing Christ as our Savior, Swedenborg believed the earliest human beings (collectively known as "Adam" in the creation story) had a very different kind of consciousness from us. Unlike us, they were conscious of the spiritual world even during their natural lives. They were able to converse freely with angels and spirits and they were able to "perceive" God's will for them. Thus they were directly led by God.

Over time, people developed individual and separate egos and human consciousness gradually journeyed to its current alienated state. This development was brought on by an ever increasing focus on worldly things at the expense of the spiritual realities. As material reality is more subject to zero-sum games than spiritual reality, a material focus led in turn to the increase in human beings of greed and the desire to control and dominate each other. Thus fear, prejudice, envy, revenge, hatred and all the other passions that cause violence came into our world. This is how Swedenborg reinterprets

the traditional Christian concept of the "Fall." The Fall was the gradual loss of the conscious connection to God and to the spiritual world that human beings once enjoyed. Jesus, according to Swedenborg, reversed the effects of the Fall in himself and regained the original state of human consciousness.

Even today, people can on occasion have their "spiritual eyes opened" and see into the spiritual world. Near Death Experiences seem to be examples of this, and sometimes even those who are with a dying person are granted glimpses of the spiritual world. Very young children, too, sometimes converse with angels. Swedenborg saw himself as someone who had been granted by God the ability to see into the spiritual world so that an increasingly materialistic human civilization could learn about the spiritual world and about the inner meaning of the Bible.

Our Transition upon Dying

Our bodies die and when this happens we call it "death." But our spirits do not die, and as the body ceases to function, the person "wakes up" in the spiritual world, and finds him- or herself to be a spiritual being, with a spiritual body. Since everything that makes us who we are as individuals resides in the spirit, we find ourselves to be exactly the same persons in the spiritual world as we were in the natural world.

In the process of transition, we are offered the opportunity to review everything we experienced and did in the course of our earthly lives. This is how Swedenborg reinterprets the traditional Christian concept of the "Last Judgment." In the presence of a compassionate Being of pure love and wisdom, we examine our life experience. If we regret the harm we did in the course of lives and if we reject the personality traits that led us to do harm, these traits are removed from us. However, if we rationalize and justify the harm we did, these traits become ours forever. Our ultimate spiritual destination is the result of our own choices, both those made in earthly life and those made as we transition.

Another way Swedenborg describes this transition is to say that our "exteriors" are gradually removed, and the people we truly are inside are revealed for all to see. In this life, we are often able to disguise our true thoughts and feelings, and frequently we fool ourselves as well. In the spiritual world we become, so to speak, completely transparent. Our true thoughts and feelings, together with our loves and values, are apparent to everyone, including—perhaps for the first time—to ourselves.

After this transition is completed, we join one of the communities of spirits that live in the spiritual world. Spirits spontaneously gather together according to common interests, you might say. That is, those who love the same things and share the same values live together in the same spiritual community. Those who love to cooperate with others in the service of God live together, and Swedenborg calls such a community a "heaven." Those who love to get their own way and to dominate and control others live with others who are just like themselves, and Swedenborg calls such a community a

"hell."

Heaven is not a Reward and Hell is not a Punishment

The account given above emphasizes our own freedom of choice and our ability to judge, and is meant in large part to counter another view of judgement. As Swedenborg notes in Heaven and Hell n. 545, many people view God as a judge who metes out rewards and punishments.

Some people hold a strong opinion that God turns his face away from certain people, rejects them from his presence, casts them into hell, and is angry against them because of their evil. Some go as far as to think that God punishes people and does them harm. They support this meaning from the literal meaning of the Word where things like this are said, not realizing that the spiritual meaning of the word is entirely different. The real doctrine of the church, drawn from the spiritual meaning of the word, teaches otherwise. It teaches that the Lord never turns his face from anyone, never rejects anyone, never casts anyone into hell, never is angry.

The important point here for Swedenborgian theology is that heaven is not a reward and hell is not a punishment. Those who love evil things do not feel at home in any of the heavens and move into that hell which feels the most natural to them. Those who find themselves in Hell are there as a result of their own free choices.

People who love and intend evil in the world intend and love evil in the other life: they no longer allow themselves to be led away from it. This is why people who are absorbed in evil are connected to hell and actually are there in spirit; after death they crave above all else to be where their evil is. Therefore it is we—not the Lord—who cast ourselves into hell after death. [Heaven and Hell, n. 547]

Indeed God as Love Itself loves, cares for, and wishes well for everyone, regardless of whether they intend good or evil.

Anyone whose mind is enlightened perceives [that the Lord does not cast into Hell] while reading the Word simply from the fact that the Lord is goodness itself, love itself and mercy itself. Good itself cannot not do harm to anyone. Love itself and mercy itself cannot spurn anyone, since this contrary to mercy and love and is therefore contrary to the divine nature itself. So ... God never turns away from us ... [but] behaves towards us out of goodness and love and mercy. That is he wills well towards, loves us, and has compassion on us. ... The Lord is constantly flowing into every individual with good, just as much into the evil person as into the good. The difference is that he is constantly leading evil people away from evil, while he is constantly leading good people toward the good. The reason for this difference lies with us, since we are the ones who accept. [Heaven and Hell.

Heaven and Hell

Those spirits who live in a heaven are "angels" and those that live in a hell are "demonic spirits" in Swedenborg's terminology. While there are many heavens and many hells, and while there is one God who is the unity of all that is good, there is no one literal Satan who rules and unifies all the hells. Also, there are no beings, according to Swedenborg, who were created as angels. An "angel" according to Swedenborg is a person who once lived on earth (or another planet with intelligent life) and then went on to become an angel.

Interestingly enough, Swedenborg says that everyone in heaven has a job. But it is the work that the angel in heaven most loves to do. Swedenborg doesn't give lots of examples, but says, for instance, that there are angels that greet and orient new arrivals and angels that help raise spirits that died in infancy or childhood. Also, all the creative and performing arts exist in heaven just as they do on earth.

The Life that Leads Toward Heaven

What does this say for our lives this side of bodily death? First of all, it says to me that we need not fear death for ourselves or for others. Our condition after death is never worse than it was here. Second, we should look at the choices we are making in life with the greatest seriousness—they are defining who we will be for all eternity. Especially important is what we are learning to love and cherish, since our loves determine which society we will gravitate toward in the spiritual world. Thirdly, we don't have to be desperate to cram as much as experience as possible into our lives on earth. What we don't get to here, we will have time for there.

Since we are already living (though unbeknownst to us) in the spiritual world, all the heavens and hells in the spiritual world seek to influence us. All the good, loving thoughts, all the sudden spiritual insights are being sent to us from the heavens, while all the cruel and violent impulses come to us from the hells. Very often you will hear a Swedenborgian say, "I know that there is a Hell, because I've been there." As spiritual states, Heaven and Hell are present this-world realities as well as post-mortem realities. In this life we experience both heaven and hell so that we may learn the difference and make our own choices.

For me, the most important thing about Swedenborg's views on Heaven and Hell are the implications for this life, as we have outlined these implications above. The detailed glimpses of the Spiritual Word which Swedenborg offers are fascinating, but after all, we will experience them for ourselves soon enough. Knowing that the Heavens and Hells are operating on us right now, and knowing that our current choices are setting our eternal direction, we should concern ourselves with removing ourselves from the Hells, while seeking to live the life which leads to Heaven. As Swedenborg insists again and again, the life which leads to Heaven is one of useful service under the guidance of

the Lord's Love and Wisdom.