

Our Connection to Heaven, part 3: Why We Need to Know about the Spiritual World

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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In the religious teachings of the whole world, even those of the Bible, there has never been a statement quite like this one from the pen of Emanuel Swedenborg, written in the year, 1769:

“That there is a spiritual world, in which spirits and angels are, distinct from the natural world in which people are, has hitherto been deeply hidden even in the Christian world. The reason is, because no angel has descended and taught it by word of mouth, and no man has ascended and seen it. Lest therefore from ignorance of that world, and the uncertain faith concerning heaven and hell resulting from it, anyone should be infatuated to such a degree as to become an atheistic naturalist, it has pleased the Lord to open the sight of my spirit, and to elevate it into heaven, and also to let it down into hell, and to present to view the quality of both” (ISB #3, in Misc. Theol. Works, p. 317).

Further, and even more strikingly, “...from what I have seen and heard I am permitted to describe these things, in the hope that thus ignorance may be enlightened and unbelief dispelled. Such immediate revelation is now made *because that is what is meant by the Coming of the Lord*” (HH #1, in 1758).

In fact, the teaching of the New Church is that this revelation “surpasses all miracles” (Invitation to the New Church #52 & 55), meaning that it’s *better than miracles* because it informs the understanding in a way that does not compel but rather *invites* belief that can really change our hearts. And *this* is what is so badly needed for the spiritual health and welfare of the world.

Finally, note that this revelation goes hand-in-glove with the revelation of *the spiritual sense of the Word*, which, we read, “surpasses all the *revelations* that have ever been made since the creation of the world. (For) through *this revelation* a communication has been opened between people on earth and the angels of heaven, and the conjunction of the two worlds has been effected...” (Inv. #44). The two things go together because “very many things of the Word’s internal sense have regard to, describe and involve those of the afterlife” (AC #67).

All these are very striking claims, many of which we in the New Church take for granted. But, you know, we need to take them seriously, and seriously apply them to our lives in this world. After all, the whole point of this life is to prepare for eternal life, but until the Lord opened Swedenborg’s eyes to the spiritual world there was such a negative, even cynical and certainly unrealistic attitude about it that people could hardly even believe in it. So he wrote and published “lest the state of heaven and hell and the state of the life of people after death should be unknown and should sleep in ignorance *and at last be buried in denial*” (CL #39).

Now let’s think about this for a minute. Is it possible even though we *have* this amazing revelation that it might “sleep in ignorance and at last be buried in denial” among us? How often in the course of a day do we think about the spiritual world? How easily do we succumb to the pressures and pain of life in this world, forgetting about the Lord’s eternal purpose for us AND His providential leading toward a very real place in heaven?

We'll review some of the practical benefits of thinking about the afterlife in a moment, but first, let's be clear about the *form* of this revelation. There are two main ways that a person could report on things seen and heard in heaven: one would be as a passive observer describing situations in summary terms – like a news reporter; the other would be to tell a story in the first person, such as “I saw two angels approaching me from the southeast...” Actually, news reporters typically use *both* techniques, giving a summary of the story and then featuring an eye witness if they can find one. The combination not only informs us but also touches our hearts because we hear and feel what it was like to be there and to experience the event.

In Swedenborg's case he does both: he explains what's going on but he also describes it as an eye-witness observer. And he reports amazing things: – lavish gardens and magnificent buildings, vivid scenery of all kinds, meetings with real historical characters whose circumstances in the other life are often surprising, including discussions and dialogs and debates.... In fact, his reports are so stunning he feels compelled to explain them in somewhat defensive terms, writing,

“I foresee that many who read the stories that are appended to the chapters of this book will believe them to be figments of the imagination. But I declare in solemn truth that they are not inventions, but were truly seen and heard; not seen and heard in some state of the mind when sound asleep, but in a state of complete wakefulness. For it has pleased the Lord to manifest Himself to me, and to send me to teach those things which will belong to His New Church, which is meant by the New Jerusalem in the Revelation. For this purpose He has opened the interiors of my mind, that is, of my spirit; and in this way it has been granted to me to be in the spiritual world with angels, and at the same time in the natural world with men, and this now for twenty seven years” (TCR #851, also CL #1).

As for the benefits of knowing and reflecting on the spiritual world: one critical and pervasive fact is that the spiritual world is the world of human spirits, that is, human minds, and that includes our own minds – which is why the association of spirits from that other world with us in this world is so straightforward. We are actually together all the time, we just don't realize it very often because we are so wrapped up in our physical sense experience.

But if we are to see and understand ourselves as spiritual beings we need to see and understand the spiritual world itself, and the implications of our thoughts and affections, not to mention our choices. These are revealed in the “case studies” of real people who have lived and died in this world and gone on to enjoy or suffer the enduring consequences of those choices, that is, the enduring consequences of that chosen way of life.

So we learn about the wise and foolish in the other life, the rich and poor, the innocent, the selfish, time, space, and all sorts of relationships, including marriage. And we are taught about the various uses that people there perform for one another. Sometimes, very frankly, the things we read about heaven or hell seem trite if not naïve or patronizing, but the truth is that these *are* the real states we experience in our own minds, if we will only strip away the inhibitions we impose on ourselves in order to present a certain appearance in this world.

Take for example the reports of angels talking about marriage. We often struggle in this life with this most intimate of all relationships, and sadly, one reason for this is that we know so little about how it really works: how the male mind is differentiated from the female, what each really

needs from the other, *and the critical role religion plays in the union*. But now we know that the people of a most ancient time on this earth knew all about it, and since heaven has been opened to us through Swedenborg's direct experience we too can learn and be inspired about it through the angels of that age.

And what do we learn? Some of the things said might be characterized by skeptics as simply "cute," hopelessly idealistic, or in our day possibly even sexist. But think more deeply. The innocence, perception and complementary, mutual love revealed in these passages are the very qualities we all most deeply crave, and yet for reasons of pride, hurt and cynicism we have buried under layers and layers of psychological defensiveness. How much more peaceful and delightful would our lives be if we could just give up these pretenses and relax and allow ourselves to be the vulnerable people we really are inside – as described in the heavenly doctrines!

Again, people, especially as we get older, sometimes lose track of time or space, often letting our thoughts wander wherever our affections take them. At some point we may even be obliged to accept unwanted dependence on others for our needs and pleasures. But is this not preparation for the angelic state of dependence on the Lord? And is it not good for others, too, as means of helping them understand the importance of caring and providing? Sure it's hard! Self-will reacts against it! Worldly ambition has no patience for it. But knowing that our lives in this world are only manifestations of our inner, spiritual lives, and that the spiritual world is a kingdom of spiritual uses involving constant give and take, *interdependence* and co-operation *in spirit*, we can see the providential elements of situations that would be intolerable by any other standard.

Sometimes people are bothered by the descriptions of characteristics of certain religious, ethnic or national groups in the spiritual world. This can seem at first like stereotyping, but the point of it is to show the real effects or consequences of a given disposition or way of thinking. For example, much is written about the Jews and Quakers, the English, the Germans and the French in the other world. Why? There are two issues: heredity and environment. In the case of the Jews we read about a strong hereditary disposition to be absorbed in the things of this world – which can lead to vital contributions in the arts and sciences, or it can lead to a kind of hollow materialism. The teaching is not given to condemn Jews but to show how that same hereditary influence can affect every one of us. In the case of the Quakers it is about the idea that we can be led and taught directly by the Holy Spirit apart from the Word. But because evil spirits can masquerade as the Holy Spirit we are shown the harmful consequences of this idea. We need to be grounded in the plain teachings of the Word in order to assess the kind of influences that are coming to us from the other world.

The English in the Writings are praised for their freedom of expression. But does this mean the English are all good? Far from it; the point is just that freedom is critical for human development, and especially spiritual development. The lesson here is not really about the English themselves – or any other nationality – it is about the principles that provide for our salvation. And so particular kings of particular historical significance are mentioned in the Writings, like Louis IX, of France, who despite his arrogance and his flagrant philandering which resulted in at least 14 illegitimate children besides those of his own two wives, is commended for his religious life and his devotion to the welfare of his nation, and shown to be in a good place in the spiritual world.

All this is of course consistent with the Lord's direct teaching, "Judge not that you be not

judged,” for we can hardly ever know the inner motives of those we observe doing good or evil deeds. Thus Swedenborg, near the end of his book about marriage, wrote,

“In the spiritual world I have met many people whose life in the natural world was no different from others’; they wore fine clothes, dined elegantly, engaged in business deals like other people to make profits, went to the theatre, joked about love affairs as if lusting for them, and did other things of the same sort. Yet the angels held some of them guilty of sinful evils, and to others they did not impute these actions as evils, declaring one group innocent, and the other guilty. When they were asked why, when both groups had done much the same, they replied that what they looked for in all cases was the *aim, intention or end in view*, and they distinguished cases on this basis, so that those who *were* excused or condemned by their end in view, they themselves excused or condemned, since all in heaven have good as their end in view, all in hell evil” (CL #453 & 527:3).

The simple truth is that we are all a mixture of good and evil, both from hereditary disposition and from the influences (hidden or obvious) that affect us. And we all get carried away sometimes despite our best efforts to control our thoughts and feelings. So we read concerning a person who has a fundamentally good intention, “If ... he does evil through ignorance or some overwhelming bodily desire, this is still not imputed to him, because he had not intended or set his mind on it” (CL #529). The only “catch” is that we do have to seriously examine ourselves at least once in a while to be clear on what is driving us – and where the influence is coming from.

And so we have the revelation of the spiritual world to guide us, a revelation that “surpasses all miracles” in that it exposes the real condition of our spiritual states and informs us of what is to come. Can we truly value this and make good use of it in our personal lives? Can we read and think about it regularly? Can we talk about it with friends and neighbors? If not, why not?

In the end, our awareness of the spiritual world should not detract in any way from the importance of life in this world. Spiritual life is determined and confirmed by what we do here and now. But to see that what we do is only an expression of what we really are inside, and to understand how the world of the spirit works within the world of time and space is very, very important. It enables us to deal with real issues and not just symptoms or appearances. It enables us to get to the root of problems and solve them rather than just getting superficial treatment. It's like the difference between taking a pill for a headache and taking action to remove the cause of the headache.

It is right and good that we are not in constant thought about the spiritual world; this would detract from our performance of simple uses for one another in the natural world. But we can be thankful that we have such revelations of the spiritual world as we do, for with them our whole lives are made meaningful, and from them we learn how to receive and cultivate a life that is inwardly rewarding and eternally fulfilling.

Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis* 28:10-22
 Children’s talk: The Angelic Link to Heaven
 Matthew 13:24-30 & 44-46; and *True Christian Religion* #568