

What Happens When You Die

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasurer is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

All Christians know that there is life after death. They don't all agree on how it works or what it will be like, or even when we will awaken to it, but they know from the Lord's many teachings about it that there is such a life. Many are looking forward to it as a reward or compensation for the difficulties of life in this world, and many, too, are counting on the punishments of hell to pay for the evils that so many seem to get away with in this world. Still, when asked about it, most say that it isn't really necessary to know much about the life after death, or that they'll find out when they get there!

But we want to know! And in fact it IS important that we know. Imagine traveling to a foreign country, or to an unknown part of your own country. Isn't it common sense to learn as much as you can about this new place before you go there - so that you can know how to dress, what the laws and customs are, and even maybe learn the language if it's different from your own language? So it is important for us to prepare for life in heaven. And in fact we are here today because we believe the Lord has fulfilled His promise (John 16:13) to give us more information and understanding about our spiritual lives, including the life after death, so that we can prepare.

Indeed, it's a preposterous claim, but it's one that every sincere seeker should examine carefully: - we believe that the Lord actually opened the eyes of an 18th century scholar and engineer to see the wonders of heaven and hell so that he could report objectively on these things for our eternal benefit. And now, therefore, we are fortunate to be in the position not only to understand what will happen to us when we cross over, but we are also able to have confidence in the welfare of those who have passed on before us, or whom we know are facing serious challenges in this life.

But if we are to understand this other world we must FIRST of all adjust our thinking. For although the spiritual world looks and feels like the natural world it is not natural, it is spiritual (I Corinth. 15:44). This means it is a world composed entirely of human affections and thoughts, or wisdom and love. Of course there are relationships in heaven, too, but they are real relationships between people who share their affections and thoughts, not relationships between people and things. In fact, we are taught that the Lord Himself MAKES heaven, and the angels live there to the extent that they receive and participate consciously in His love and wisdom. As for hell, well, we live there when we live in the opposites of love and wisdom, namely selfishness and misunderstanding.

Now because the spiritual world is the world of our spirits it's a fact that we are all living in that world now, we just don't realize it most of the time because we are so caught up in the natural world of our senses. We also hide our true feelings a lot of the time, just as others hide theirs - and often for good reason! - and this makes it hard to know what is real and what is just an appearance on the surface of our lives. But of course, when we cross over, all that changes.

What's it like, then? Well, first of all, we come into a very peaceful state and we are surrounded

with the gentlest of angels who help us with our adjustment to the change. Just as we lose control of our natural bodies as we die, so when we first become fully conscious on the other side we experience a loss of control, that is to say, a real release from the fears and inhibitions that tend to control our thinking and behaviour in this world. New research on the things that have been revealed to us suggests that in this state we are actually blessed with a heightened awareness of internal, that is, celestial and spiritual things, and a calm acceptance without any sense of urgency to respond. (In a sense this is similar to the state many people experience on this side at the point of death - as reported by those who have “near-death experiences:” there is a heightened awareness of spiritual things like love and light and the presence of angels.) Only gradually does this heightened awareness fade as we return in general to the dominant thoughts and affections we had while in the natural world. And then our very personal “journey” to our own “place” in heaven or hell begins.

But let’s look carefully at this whole process.¹ Medical science today has rather complicated the matter of when a person dies, since it has given us the ability to prolong the operation of the heart and lungs, or even to provide mechanical substitutes for these (and other) organs when they shut down. So we usually say that death occurs when we cannot with our scientific instruments detect any activity of the brain. But in the Writings we are told that death occurs when all the subtle motions of the heart completely stop. Then the process of resuscitation, that is, the separation of the spirit from the body, begins (HH 447).

As this takes place our personal affections are suppressed, or “taken away,” evidently so that we don’t interfere with the delicate work that is going on. At this point the very gentlest and most loving angels - called celestial angels - silently attend us and begin to share their thoughts with us. They do this simply by looking into our face, very kindly and tenderly appealing to us to open up. This is done before our eyes are opened, so it is a very peaceful state, like when we slowly wake up after a good night’s sleep. The operation is described as a pulling or drawing out of the spirit (HH 449), as this actually is what happens. Maybe you have been in the company of people like this here on earth from time to time: they just have an almost magical way of drawing you out and making you feel comfortable; they eagerly accept you and seem to appreciate you and really care for you, no questions asked, no judgments passed.

These celestial angels continue with us as long as possible, but at some point our own thoughts return as the focus of our attention and these begin to pull us away. Then, we read, angels with a more intellectual, thought-based or self-conscious focus - spiritual angels - approach and “take over” from the celestial ones. They bring light - like the first light we experience when our eyes are still closed in the morning after sleep, but day has dawned. And then an interesting thing happens: we read that “something is felt to be gently rolled off from the face” (HH 450); it is only a feeling, or an appearance, but it represents an awakening of conscious awareness that we have actually entered the spiritual world, never to return to the natural. In effect, the veil is lifted and we see clearly what is going on within and around us on the spiritual plane. The angels, in turn, provide every service

¹ There are three places in Swedenborg’s writings where we can read explicitly about the transition (or resuscitation) from this world to the next, the Arcana Caelestia, beginning at #168, Heaven and Hell, beginning at #445, and the Spiritual Diary (Spiritual Experiences), beginning at #1092. Because we believe this information is revealed by the Lord through Swedenborg we do not refer to it as Swedenborg’s teaching, but as the revelation of “the Writings.”

they can to make us comfortable in our new surroundings, teaching us all about our new world - to the extent we are interested or willing to learn. Again, you have probably known people like this here on earth: they are born teachers and great companions! - they listen attentively and seem to know how to answer every question so that you are inspired, reassured, and not only understand but feel understood.

And then there is a third transition, or a fourth, depending on our attitude and disposition: if we are not much interested in the explanations of things that the spiritual angels have to give, we will withdraw from them and seek others with, perhaps, a more practical or action-oriented focus. These are called "natural angels," "angelic spirits," or sometimes simply "good spirits." These are the angels who live most nearly like simple good people on earth, not caring much for deep thought or personal sharing about their loves and affections, but who are dedicated to an honest, productive, useful life. They, too, offer every service that will help us adjust to the realities of life in our new world, but again, if we aren't interested or don't find them helpful we withdraw from them, too, and seek the company of others - perhaps those who are really self-centred or worldly-minded. And of course, if that's the case we are actually heading toward hell.

All these progressive states - which are all part of the initial resuscitation - unfold for us after death in what would be about three days of time as we know it (HH 451). So we move fairly quickly from the first heightened celestial awareness of love and affection, through a state of spiritual awareness of thought and reflection, to a state that is more or less like our rather dull natural perceptions on earth, focussing mostly on what we are doing rather than what's going on within ourselves on those deeper levels. Thus our ordinary states of mind, our familiar thoughts and feelings based on our senses and our experiences in the world are gradually restored and, having had a taste of all that may lie ahead for us, we are prepared actually to seek and find our own special place in heaven or hell. So the next phase of our introduction to the spiritual world begins.

At this point we are wide awake, but our wakefulness is as it was in the natural world - self-conscious, inhibited, and full of all the cares and concerns that pre-occupied us in the world. We also look and feel the same as we did before - same height, same weight, same facial features and so on corresponding to the appearance we had in the world. If we were pre-occupied about something before we died we return to that pre-occupation; if we enjoyed certain kinds of activity we begin to seek the same enjoyments again; and if we are anxious to meet someone who has passed on before us we may seek that person out. In this period of our introduction we are still very much involved in the issues that relate to our external memory, indeed our whole external life, and we can be this way for what seems like days, or months, or even a year - but hardly ever longer than a year.

Then gradually an irrevocable change takes place as we begin to leave our natural concerns and inhibitions behind, entering more willfully and freely into the delights of our interior minds. Little by little we let ourselves go, we stop trying to please others or appear a certain way to them when we don't really feel like it, we stop worrying about the consequences of our actions if we don't really care, and we become obviously what we really want to be (HH 457). It is important to note that this is not a process of judgment imposed by others, least of all by the Lord Himself, rather it is a process of self-discovery and self-disclosure, in effect self-judgment but according to the inner states and motives that may have lain hidden in this world behind a civil, social or spiritual facade. Depending on the degree of confusion or conflict between our internal and our external states, and how willing

we are to “let go,” this process can last up to 30 years, but again, hardly ever more than that.

Once our inner natures have been fully exposed and clarified, we are ready to move on - those who love truth and justice - or in more human terms, those who love the Lord and the neighbour! - to learn more about these things as they prepare for heaven, and those who don't care to a place where no one else cares either, namely hell.

So, we read, “There are three states that we pass through after death before we arrive in either heaven or hell. The first is one of more outward concerns, the second is one of more inward concerns, and the third is one of preparation” (HH 491). This is the general rule. But, of course, there are some who are so fully prepared in this life that they actually go directly to heaven and there are some who are so inwardly confirmed in their evils and so hypocritical that they go directly to hell.

Here's a little more about the first state. Curiously enough, apart from the initial resuscitation process, it is so much like our experience in the natural world some spirits don't even realize that they have died. The implication is either that they don't pay attention to the angels who first come to them after their death, or that they regard what they felt, heard and saw then as a fantasy, or perhaps a dream. Since everything looks and feels as it did before, the states of the natural mind still being active, they think they are still in the natural world.

I remember a time when I thought about this and wondered whether I might have died! I was driving late one night from a place in Orange County, where I had been teaching, back to Los Angeles on one of those busy, multi-laned California highways. Suddenly my head snapped up and I realized that I was veering off to the shoulder and that for a split second I had dozed off. I came to my senses and took the next exit, parked at a gas station and considered the situation. In fact I took a little nap. But it occurred to me at one point that this is what it might be like to wake up in the spiritual world: - very much involved in what I had been doing, but “in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye,” as Paul wrote, “changed.” Other writers have expressed that the transition from this world to the next may be no more jarring than a walk from one room into another. We hear the same, feel the same, think the same – we ARE the same, all except that the body we have is now spiritual.

But, of course, as we meet people in the other world whom we know have died before us, and as we pay attention to what's going on, we realize we have crossed over. At first, then, we may want to know whether we are going to be taken to heaven or sent to hell, but as our inhibitions fall and our true, internal states become clear, we actually find our OWN way to the company of those who are like us. We “self-sort” as it were, fleeing from evil if we are good, and fleeing from good if we are evil (HH 511). All this is described in many pages of detailed reporting by Swedenborg from his own experience, and it reveals more than just a curiosity about the other life: - what it tells us, in effect, is that if we want to “go” to heaven we had better get busy cultivating heavenly affections and thoughts in this world, not just outwardly nice or civil behaviour! For it is our **IN**ternal states that will determine our **E**ternal lives, and once we cross over we cannot change!

Still, if we are aimed in the right direction the Lord can work with us. This is why the Writings mention that third state. No one can have a perfect grasp of the truth; Divine wisdom is infinite! But if we have cultivated in ourselves a LOVE of truth and a willingness to abide by it, not for fear of consequences if we don't but from a genuine desire to please the Lord, we can learn. And so the third state is for those who are ready and eager to learn more – about Him, about His Word and about

the life of true charity toward the neighbour. Everyone learns differently, and the instruction provided by the angels is accommodated most perfectly to people from all religions and walks of life (HH 515) so that in the end each one finds a “place” where he or she can feel uniquely useful, happy and fulfilled by serving others and by sharing what is good and true, growing forever in love and wisdom with them.

Now, does all this make sense or not? Does it seem just and fair? Is it information that makes you think about your life in heaven or hell? Does it agree with Scripture? And does it help you see how you can prepare yourself for that better place? If so there’s a lot more where this came from, and there’s a lot of reading and reflecting you can do to familiarize yourself with the realities and conditions of eternal life.

One thing’s for sure, there’s no faking it in heaven; your true nature will come out. Are you ready for that to happen this week or next? What about next year? If not, what are you going to do about it?

Amen.

Questions or Discussion

Lessons: Matthew 5: 1-12
 Children’s Talk on Eternal Life (drop & bucket illustration)

 Luke 16:19-31

 Heaven & Hell #457