



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

An Introduction to the Swedenborgian Way of Life

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A Course Consisting of Weekly Reflections on Swedenborg's Theology

Course Outline

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TRADITIONAL CHRISTIANITY:

There is a myth behind traditional Christianity's understanding of heaven and hell. The myth concerns angels and demons. Angels and demons in traditional Christianity are a semi-divine class of beings. They are different from mortal human beings. The myth goes like this: In the beginning, there were only angels and God. Lucifer was the highest angel. Pride took over Lucifer, and he desired to rule all the created universe. War broke out in heaven—angels against angels. Lucifer had an army of angels on his side and God had an army of angels on His side. Lucifer was defeated and cast down from heaven into the newly created hell. Lucifer became the ruler of hell, and his army became the demons in hell. Some say that Lucifer was also given to rule the earth. There is scant Biblical support for this myth. The only real source for this myth is Isaiah 14:12-17:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the

congregation, in the sides of the north:

I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit. They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, and consider thee, saying, Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms; That made the world as a wilderness, and destroyed the cities thereof; that opened not the house of his prisoners?¹

¹ *The Holy Bible, King James Version*. Cambridge Edition: 1769; *King James Bible Online*, 2016.

Modern translations read this passage as pertaining to the kingdom of Babylon in the 6th century BCE.

Traditional Christianity teaches that humans are judged by Jesus when they die and are either sent to heaven to live with the angels or cast down to hell to be tormented by demons. Heaven is described in different ways. Some say that it is a paradisiacal garden where good souls rest in bliss. Others say that it is a place like church where people sing praises to God. Hell is a fiery place where one burns eternally and is tortured by demons.

In some popular beliefs, souls live forever in heaven or hell. But the church teaches that when we die we sleep in our graves. Then there will be a final judgement when Jesus comes in the clouds of heaven. The dead will rise up out of their graves. Jesus will judge the human race and separate the good from the evil. The good will live on earth in human form on a restored planet that will be like the garden of Eden. The evil will be cast down to burn forever in hell and be tormented by demons. This teaching is stated briefly in the Nicene Creed:

“He [Jesus] shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. . . and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”²

Most Christians believe that Jesus saves. So only those who accept Jesus as their savior are saved. Believers of other religions, who do not believe in Jesus, are damned. The primary Biblical verse for this is John 3:16:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

² Wilhelm, Joseph. The Nicene Creed. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 11. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. 17 Nov. 2016

SWEDENBORGIAN VIEW:

Swedenborg's view of heaven and hell has little in common with that of traditional Christianity. Angels and demons are not a separate class of beings. They are both from the human race. Angels are good people who have transitioned into the next life and demons are bad people who have transitioned into the next life. The life we live in heaven or hell is a continuation of the life we here on earth.

No one is cast into hell by God, nor does God open the pearly gates for others. People choose for themselves according to where they are most comfortable. Heat and light shine forth from God in the next life. The heat is God's love—don't we say that loving people are warm? And light is God's wisdom—don't we say that smart people are brilliant, or bright?

Our task on earth is to become loving and wise. When we have love in our hearts and wisdom in our minds, we can live in heaven's heat and light. Mean-spirited people who have not cultivated a loving disposition, and who prefer false notions over the truth can't stand heaven's heat and brilliant light. Of their own accord, they depart from the light and heat and find their way to a place away from God in which the dark cold feels more comfortable. The Swedenborgian poet William Blake captures this idea well in a poem entitled *The Little Black Boy*:

“My mother bore me in the southern wild,
 And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
 White as an angel is the English child:
 But I am black as if bereav'd of light.
 My mother taught me underneath a tree

And sitting down before the heat of day,
 She took me on her lap and kissed me,
 And pointing to the east began to say.
 Look on the rising sun: there God does live
 And gives his light, and gives his heat away.
 And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
 Comfort in morning joy in the noonday.
 And we are put on earth a little space,
 That we may learn to bear the beams of love,
 And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
 Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.
 For when our souls have learned the heat to bear
 The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.
 Saying: come out from the grove my love and care,
 And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.
 Thus did my mother say and kissed me,
 And thus I say to little English boy.
 When I from black and he from white cloud free,
 And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:
 I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,
 To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.
 And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
 And be like him and he will then love me."³

³ Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. New York: Orion, 1967. Print.

Heaven or hell are much like life here on earth, according to the Lord's Prayer, "On earth as it is in heaven." Everyone has a job in heaven or hell that they love to do. Swedenborg says that sitting in a garden would get boring after a while as would singing praises. One is most happy doing something that we love to do. Some study, some are governors, some are teachers, some work with children, some guard humans from evil spirits—in fact there are so many functions that they can't be named. There are more functions than there are on earth and there is full employment in heaven. Think of what you love to do most, and you will be doing that for eternity. There are two principal loves in heaven—love for God and everything that is good, and love for each other. In heaven, everyone tries to make everyone else happy and feels happy when others are happy.

In hell there is perpetual frustration. The two principal loves in hell are to possess everything in creation, or a craving for unlimited wealth, and a desire to control or dominate others. The desire to control can reach such intensity as to wish to control God Himself, i.e., to be god. Since you can't have everything, those who want it all and can't have it all are frustrated.

Those who want to control are allowed to control—for a while. But the people they rule over hate being dominated. So they rebel and another person ends up dominating the others. It is important to stress that everyone can come into heaven. God wants everyone to be with God in heaven and to be as happy as we can bear. We are free to turn in any direction we want. No one can blunder into hell by accident. People who choose hell do so because they want to be bad and deliberately do what they know to be bad, because it is bad. People find heaven when they want to be good and strive to be good according to what they know to be good.

Since heaven is a place of spiritual warmth, all warm people are comfortable there. Thus everyone trying to be good, according to their best understanding of good, come into heaven. Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists, Jews, and followers of all the world's religions can come into heaven.

How does Swedenborg come up with these ideas? Swedenborg's claim is that he had visionary experiences of heaven and hell while he was on earth. That is, he saw into the next life. It seems that this is not such a hard idea to accept these days, as there are many life-after-life accounts and stories of people who have seen angels and even God in near-death experiences. It may be quite a claim of Swedenborg's. The real question is whether this idea makes sense.

Biblical support is essentially non-existent for Swedenborg's idea of heaven and hell. In fact, there is surprisingly little in the Bible at all about heaven and hell. Swedenborg wrote a whole book describing heaven and hell. Though he describes what heaven and hell are like, all through the book, Swedenborg says that words cannot capture the reality of the next life.

Swedenborg on Heaven and Hell:

“People in the Christian world are totally unaware that heaven and hell come from the human race. They actually believe that angels were created in the beginning and constitute heaven, and that the devil or Satan was an angel of light who became rebellious and was cast out together with his faction, and that this gave rise to hell. . . . in all heaven there is not a single angel who was created as such in the beginning, nor is there in all hell a devil who was created as an angel of light and cast out. Rather, all the people in heaven and in hell are from the human race—in heaven the ones who have lived in heavenly love and faith, and in hell the ones who have lived in hellish love and faith.”⁴
(*Heaven and Hell* n. 311)

“We may gather the magnitude of heaven's pleasure simply from the fact that for everyone there it is delightful to share their pleasure and bliss with someone else; and

⁴ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Heaven and Hell*. Trans. George F. Dole. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2008. Print.

since everyone in the heavens is like this, we can see how immense heaven's pleasure is. For as I explained above (§268), there is in heaven a sharing by everyone with each individual, and by each individual with everyone." (*Heaven and Hell* n. 399)

Heaven's light is not natural like the light of our world, but spiritual. It actually comes from the Lord as the sun, and that sun, as explained in the preceding chapter, is divine love. While what emanates from the Lord as the sun is called divine truth in the heavens, in essence it is divine good as one with divine truth. This is the source of light and warmth for angels: they get their light from the divine truth and their warmth from the divine good. (*Heaven and Hell* n. 127)

Since heaven's light is divine truth, that light is also divine wisdom and intelligence. Consequently "being raised into heaven's light" means the same thing as "being raised into intelligence and wisdom" and "being enlightened." So too, light among angels is at exactly the same level as their intelligence and wisdom. Since heaven's light is divine wisdom, people are recognized in heaven's light for what they really are. Everyone's inner nature shines forth from the face just as it is, with nothing whatever concealed. Further, the more internally minded angels love to have everything within them visible because they do not intend anything but what is good. It is different for people who are below heaven and do not intend what is good. They are profoundly afraid of being seen in heaven's light. Remarkably, people in hell look human to each other, but in heaven's light they look like monsters, with frightful faces and bodies, in the exact form of their evil. We have a similar appearance as to our spirits when angels look at us. If we are good, we look like handsome individuals in accord with our goodness; if we are evil we look like monsters, misshapen in accord with our evil. We can see from this that everything is clear in heaven's light. It is clear because heaven's light is divine truth. (*Heaven and Hell* n. 131)

“Something now needs to be said about heaven’s warmth. In its essence, heaven’s warmth is love. It emanates from the Lord as the sun, which is divine love for the Lord and from the Lord, as has been explained in the preceding chapter. We can therefore see that heaven’s warmth is just as spiritual as its light, because they come from the same source. There are two things that emanate from the Lord as the sun, divine truth and divine good. Divine truth comes out in heaven as light and divine good as warmth. However, divine truth and divine good are so united that they are not two, but one. For angels, though, they are separated. There are angels who accept divine good more readily than divine truth, and there are angels who accept divine truth more readily than divine good. The ones who are more open to divine good are in the Lord’s heavenly kingdom; the ones who are more open to divine truth are in the Lord’s spiritual kingdom. The most perfect angels are the ones who are equally open to both.” (*Heaven and Hell* n. 133)

When we move from the natural world into the spiritual, which happens when we die, we take with us everything that pertains to our character except our earthly body. In fact, when we enter the spiritual world or our life after death, we are in a body as we were in this world. There seems to be no difference, since we do not feel or see any difference. This body is spiritual, though, so it has been separated or purified from earthly matter. Further, when anything spiritual touches and sees something spiritual, it is just like something natural touching and seeing something natural. So when we have become a spirit, we have no sense that we are not in the body we inhabited in the world, and therefore do not realize that we have died. As “spirit-people,” we enjoy every outer and inner sense we enjoyed in the world. We see the way we used to, we hear and talk the way we used to; we smell and taste and feel things when we touch them the way we used to; we want, wish, crave, think, ponder, are moved, love, and intend the way we used to. Studious types still read and write as before. In a word, when we move from the one life into the other, or from the one world into the other, it is like moving from one [physical] place to another; and we take with us everything we owned as persons to the point that it would be unfair to say that we have lost anything of

our own after death, which is only a death of the earthly body. [3] We even take with us our natural memory, since we retain everything we have heard, seen, read, learned, or thought in the world from earliest infancy to the very end of life.” (*Heaven and Hell* n. 461)

“Heavenly love is loving what is good, honest, and fair because it is good, honest, and fair, and doing it because of that love. This is why they have a life of goodness, honesty, and fairness, which is a heavenly life. If we love these things for their own sakes and do or live them, we are also loving the Lord above all because they come from him. We are also loving our neighbor, because these things are our neighbor who is to be loved. Carnal love, though, is loving what is good and honest and fair not for their own sakes but for our own sake, because we can use them to gain prestige, position, and profit. In this case we are not focusing on the Lord and our neighbor within what is good and honest and fair but on ourselves and the world, and we enjoy deceit. When the motive is deceit, then whatever is good and honest and fair is actually evil and dishonest and unfair. This is what we love within [the outward appearance].” (*Heaven and Hell* n. 481)

“There are so many offices and departments in heaven, so many tasks, that there are simply too many to list. There are relatively few in the world. No matter how many people are involved, they are all caught up in a love of their work and tasks out of a love of service—no one out of selfishness or a love of profit. In fact, there is no love of profit for the sake of livelihood, since all the necessities of life are given them gratis. They are housed gratis, clothed gratis, and fed gratis.”

(*Heaven and Hell* n. 393)

FOR FURTHER READING:

Heaven and Hell.