



Hell is Not Eternal - Unless We Want It to Be

Rev. Hugh Odhner

A Sermon delivered at the Philadelphia Society of the Lord's New Church



Readings

Matthew 25:31-46 (NKJV)

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’

“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’

“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’

“Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”¹

¹ The Holy Bible: New King James Version. Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996.

Luke 16:19-31 (NKJV)

“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

“Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’

“Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’”²

²Ibid.

Emanuel Swedenborg, Divine Providence §251, 285, 286

The Lord cannot rescue any of us from our hell unless we see that we are in it and want to be rescued. (D.P. §251)

Within each of us, good and evil alike, there are two abilities. One of them makes up our discernment and the other our volition. The ability that makes up our discernment is our ability to differentiate and think, so we call it “rationality.” The ability that makes up our volition is our ability freely to do these things—think, and therefore speak and act as well—as long as they do not violate our reason or rationality. Acting freely is doing whatever we want to whenever we want to do it. These two abilities are constant. They are unbroken from beginnings to endings overall and in detail in everything we think and do. They are not intrinsic to us but are in us from the Lord.

It therefore follows that when the Lord’s presence is in these abilities it is a presence in details as well, even in the very smallest details of our discernment and thought, of our volition and desire, and therefore of our speech and action. Take these abilities out of any least detail and you could not think it or speak of it like a human being. (D.P. §285)

Now since it is a law of divine providence that we can act freely and rationally (that is, availing ourselves of the two abilities called freedom and rationality), and since it is also a law of divine providence that whatever we do seems to be done by us and therefore to be ours, and since we can infer from these laws that evils have to be permitted, it follows that we can misuse these abilities. We can freely and rationally justify anything we please. We can take anything we please and make it rational, whether it is inherently rational or not. (D.P. §286)

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³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. Divine Providence. Translated by George F. Dole. New Century Edition ed. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

The Word of the Lord, in all three Testaments, contains many apparent contradictions and paradoxes...

For example, Matthew 11 says:

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

While Matthew 7:12-14 says:

"Enter by the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and easy is the way that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For narrow is the gate and hard is the way that leads to life, and few are those who find it."

The first passage implies that following the Lord and the way to heaven is easy and the burden is light, while the second passage implies that the way to heaven is hard and very few find it. Both of these passages are quoted in Heaven and Hell 533 and 534 and what is said there indicates how both passages can be true. From Heaven and Hell 533 we read:

"We can now see that it is not so hard to lead the life of heaven as people think, because it is simply a matter of recognizing, when something attractive comes up that we know is dishonest or unfair, that this is not to be done because it is against the divine commandments. If we get used to thinking like this, and from this familiarity form a habit, then we are gradually united to heaven. To the extent that we are united to heaven, the higher levels of our minds are opened, and to the extent that they are opened, we see what is dishonest and unfair; and to the extent that we see this, these qualities can be dispelled. For no evil can be banished until it has been seen. This is a state we can enter because of our freedom, since everyone is free to think in this way. However, once the process has started, the Lord works his wonders within us, and causes us not only to see evils but to refuse them and eventually to turn away from them."

This is the meaning of the Lord's words 'My yoke is easy and my burden light' (Matthew 11:30). It is

important to realize, though, that the difficulty of thinking like this and also of resisting evils increases to the extent that we deliberately do evil things—in fact, to that extent we become used to doing them until ultimately we no longer see them. Then we come to love them and to excuse them to gratify our love and to rationalize them with all kinds of self-deceptions and call them permissible and good. This happens, though, to people who in early adulthood plunge into all kinds of evil without restraint and at the same time at heart reject everything divine.” (H.H. §533)⁴

So the yoke becomes easy and the burden light to the degree that we resist doing what is evil when the thought of doing so occurs to us, but it becomes increasingly hard the more we give in to our devilish desires and become accustomed to excusing them. Now this idea ties in with the subject of our sermon, Hell is Not Eternal - Unless We Want It to Be, and with our text from Divine Providence §251, “The Lord withdraws no one from his hell unless he sees that he is in hell and wishes to be led out...”

The Lord loves everyone because he is pure Divine Love. And from that Divine Love he wishes to draw everyone into heaven provided that they wish to be with Him in heaven. To everyone the Lord gives freedom, and he never takes that away from anyone. So in the laws of Divine Providence it is said:

Man possesses reason and freedom, or rationality and liberty; and these two faculties are in man from the Lord (D.P. §73).

It is by means of these two faculties that man is reformed and regenerated by the Lord; and without them he cannot be reformed and regenerated (D.P. §82).

The Lord preserves these two faculties in man inviolate and as sacred in the whole course of His Divine providence (D.P. §96).

1. Without these two faculties man would not possess will and understanding, and would not be

⁴Swedenborg, Emanuel. Heaven and Hell. Translated by George F. Dole. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

man (D.P. §96.2).

2. Without these two faculties man could not be conjoined with the Lord, and thus could not be reformed and regenerated (D.P. §96.5).

3. Without these two faculties man could not have immortality and eternal life (D.P. §96.7).

Notice that it is said that the Lord gives freedom and reason to everyone, and that from these we have immortality and eternal life. This applies to all of us both good and bad, to those in heaven and to those in hell. The Divine Providence is equally with the evil and with the good. (D.P. §287)

Let us look at some more laws of the Divine Providence:

Every person may be reformed, and there is no such thing as predestination. (D.P. §322)

The end of creation is a heaven made from the human race (D.P. §323).

1. Everyone was created to live forever (D.P. §324.1).

2. Everyone was created to live to eternity in a state of blessedness (D.P. §324.6).

3. Thus everyone was created to come into heaven (D.P. §324.7).

Therefore it is of the Divine providence that everyone can be saved, and that those are saved who acknowledge God and live well (D.P. §325).

The person himself is to blame if he is not saved (D.P. §327).

Some more laws of Divine Providence:

The operation of the Divine providence for the salvation of man begins at his birth and continues until the end of his life and afterwards to eternity (D.P. §332).

The operation of the Divine providence goes on unceasingly, through means, out of pure mercy (D.P. §335).

Instantaneous salvation from mercy apart from means is impossible (D.P. §338).

From these laws of Divine Providence, it is clear that the Lord wishes to draw everyone into heaven, as said earlier. The question really is whether the person or spirit wishes to be with the Lord in heaven. Many of those who are concerned about whether the hells are eternal may have a question as to whether the Lord desires to punish people eternally. He doesn't! They may wonder whether he wishes to save everyone. He does! And he loves us so much that he will not force us to love him in return if we do not want to. He regards our freedom as something sacred (D.P. §96).

So going back to our text: The Lord withdraws no one from his hell unless he sees that he is in hell and wishes to be led out....” The Lord is endeavoring constantly to withdraw everyone from his or her own hell. But if we really desire to be there, if we love to be there, he will not relocate us against our will.

Now that passage and all the laws of Providence we may want to apply especially to the spirits who choose to live in hell. But perhaps it makes more sense to apply the passages much closer to home. Doesn't it make more sense to see the passages in relation to our own lives. Most of us have experienced times when it seems like we are living in hell. Those who have had experience with addictions may know what this is like. And most of us, perhaps I should say all of us, have times when we are thinking and acting like devils -- thinking unkind thoughts about others, wishing others would get what they so rightly deserve -- according to our judgment, gossiping, backbiting, criticizing. Most of us have been there, sometimes on a daily basis, sometimes several times a day. That is our own personal hell it creates a hellish attitude within us, and may create a hellish environment around us. And that is what the Lord wishes to withdraw us from. But for him to do so it is necessary for us to see and recognize the state we are in and desire to be led out. If we truly have that desire, the Lord will provide us the means to lead us out.

AMEN.