

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 26 III.5

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), *Heaven and Hell*

The world of spirits is neither heaven nor hell but a place or a state of being between the two. It is where we first arrive after death. From there in due course we are either raised into heaven or thrown into hell, depending on how we have lived in this world.

It became clear to me that it is a halfway place when I saw that the hells were underneath it and the heavens above it, and that it is a halfway state of being when I learned that as long as we are in it, we are not yet in either heaven or hell.

In the following pages, where I say “spirits,” I mean people in the world of spirits; while by “angels” I mean people in heaven. There is a vast number of people in the world of spirits, because that is where everyone is first gathered and where everyone is examined and prepared. There is no fixed limit to our stay there. Some people barely enter it and are promptly either taken up into heaven or thrown down into hell. Some stay there for only a few weeks, others for a number of years, though not more than thirty. The variations in the length of our stay occur because of the correspondence or lack of correspondence between our deeper and our outer natures.

In the following pages I will be explaining just how we are prepared and led from one state of being into another. After we die, just as soon as we arrive in the world of spirits, we are carefully sorted out by the Lord. Evil people are immediately connected with the hellish community their ruling love had affiliated them with in the world, and good people are immediately connected with the heavenly community their love and kindness and faith had affiliated them with in the world. Even though we are sorted out in this way, we are still together in that world and can talk to anyone when we want to, to friends and acquaintances from our physical life, especially husbands and wives, and also brothers and sisters. I have seen a father recognizing and talking with his six sons. I have seen many other people with their relatives and friends. However, since they differed in character because of their life in the world, they parted company after a little while.

However, people who go into heaven from the world of spirits do not see people who go into hell, and vice versa. Nor do those in each group recognize the others in it unless they have a similar character because of a similarity in what they love. The reason they can see these other people when they are in the world of spirits but not when they are in heaven or hell is that while they are in the world of spirits they are brought into states of being like those they were in during their physical lives, one

after another. After a while, though, they settle into a constant state of being that agrees with the state of their ruling love. In this state of being, people recognize others only if what they love is similar, since similarity unites and dissimilarity separates. Just as the world of spirits is a state of being halfway between heaven and hell, it is also a halfway place, as I mentioned earlier.

The hells are underneath it and the heavens above it. All the hells are closed on the side that faces that world, and are accessible only through holes and crevices like those in rocks and through broad gaps that are guarded to prevent anyone from coming out without permission, which is granted only in cases of real need. Heaven, too, is bounded on all sides, and the only access to any heavenly community is by a narrow way whose entry is also guarded. These exits and entrances are what are called the doors and gates of hell and heaven in the Word. The world of spirits looks like a valley surrounded by mountains and cliffs, with glens and rising ground here and there. The doorways and entrances to heavenly communities become visible only to people who have been readied for heaven, and no one else finds them.

There is one entrance going from the world of spirits to each community, and beyond that there is only one path; but as the path goes upward, it splits into many. The doorways and gates to the hells are visible only to the people who are about to enter them. The gates open for them, and then they can see dark, sooty-looking caves slanting downward into the depths, where there are still more gates. Rank, foul stench breathes out from them. Good spirits flee from these odors because they are repelled by them, but evil spirits are drawn toward them because they find them enjoyable. In fact, just as we enjoy our own evil in this world, we find enjoyment after death in the stench that corresponds to our evil. This can be compared to the enjoyment shown by carrion birds and beasts, such as crows and wolves and pigs, which fly or run toward rotting corpses as soon as they get wind of them. I heard one man who screamed aloud in utter torment at a breath of air from heaven, but was calm and happy when a breath from hell reached him.

There are two doors, so to speak, within each of us as well, one facing hell and open to evil and false things from there, the other facing heaven and open to good and true things from there. The door to hell is opened for people who focus on what is evil and on the falsity that comes from evil, though just a little light from heaven flows in through certain cracks, which enables us to think, reason, and speak. On the other hand, the door to heaven is opened for people who focus on what is good and thus on what is true. There are actually two paths that lead to our rational mind, one from above the mind or from inside it, through which goodness and truth enter from the Lord, and one from below the mind or from outside it, through which evil and falsity infiltrate from hell. The rational mind itself is in the middle, where these two paths meet; so the more light from heaven is let in, the more rational we are, and the more that light is shut out, the less rational we are, however the situation may appear to us.

I have mentioned these things so that our correspondence with heaven and with hell may be known. While our rational mind is in the process of being formed, it corresponds to the world of spirits.

What is above it belongs to heaven, and what is beneath it belongs to hell. In people who are being readied for heaven, the higher aspects of the mind open, and the lower close against the inflow of evil and falsity. In people who are being readied for hell, the lower aspects open, and the higher close against the inflow of goodness and truth. As a result, the latter people can look only downward, toward hell, and the former people can look only upward, toward heaven. Looking upward is looking toward the Lord, because he is the common center that everything in heaven faces. Looking downward, though, is looking away from the Lord toward the opposite center, the center toward which everything in hell faces and gravitates.

Anyone who thinks things through carefully can see that it is not the body that thinks, because the body is material. Rather, it is the soul, because the soul is spiritual. The human soul, whose immortality has been the topic of many authors, is our spirit; it is in fact immortal in all respects, and it is also what does the thinking in our bodies. This is because it is spiritual and the spiritual is open to the spiritual and lives spiritually, through thinking and willing. So all the rational life we can observe in our bodies belongs to the soul and none of it to the body. Actually, the body is material, as just noted, and the matter that makes up the body is an added element, almost like an extension to the spirit. Its purpose is to enable our spirit to lead its life and perform its services in a physical world that is material in all respects and essentially lifeless. Since matter is not alive—only spirit is—we may conclude that whatever is alive in us is our spirit and that the body only serves it exactly the way a tool serves a living force that makes it move. We may, of course, say that a tool works or moves or strikes, but it is a mistake to believe that this is a property of the tool and not of the person who is wielding it.

Since everything that is alive in the body—everything that acts and senses things because it is alive—belongs to the spirit alone and none of it belongs to the body, it follows that the spirit is the actual person. In other words, when seen for what we really are, we are spirits, and we also have the same form as our spirits. You see, everything inside us that is alive and senses things belongs to our spirit, and there is nothing in us, from head to toe, that is not alive and able to experience the senses. This is why when our bodies are separated from our spirits, which is called dying, we still continue to be human and to be alive. I have heard from heavenly sources that some dead people—while they are lying in the coffin, before they have been restored to life after death—continue to think even in their cold bodies. They cannot help but feel that they are alive, except that they cannot move a single atom of the matter that makes up their bodies.

We could not think or will anything if there were nothing supporting our thought and will—some substance where thinking and willing arise and in which they take place. We may imagine something happening apart from a supporting substance, but nothing like that exists. We can tell this from the fact that we could not see without an organ that supports our sight, or hear without an organ that supports our hearing. Apart from these, sight and hearing would be nothing, would not exist. The same holds true for thought, which is inner sight, and for perception, which is inner hearing. Unless these arose from and happened in substances that took the form of supporting organs, they would not happen at all.

We may gather from this that our spirit is also in a form, that its form is that of a human being, and that it possesses its senses and sensory organs when it is separated from its body just as it did when it was in its body. We may gather that the entire experience of the eye, the entire experience of the ear, in fact our sensory experience as a whole belongs not to the body but to the spirit, which occupies the sensory organs completely, right through to their smallest feature. This is why spirits see and hear and experience their senses just as much as we do, though after they have left the body this sensing does not take place in the physical world but in the spiritual one. When they were in the body, their mental experience of the senses on the physical level occurred through the material part that was an added element to their spirit. However, they were throughout that time having mental experiences purely on the spiritual level through their thinking and willing.

I have presented this to persuade rational people that, when seen for what we really are, we are spirits, and that the physical part added to us so that we can function in the physical and material world is not the real person but only the tool of our spirit. A great deal of experience has taught me that with respect to our inner self we are spirits—experience that would fill whole volumes, as they say, if I were to include it all. I have talked with spirits as a spirit and I have talked with them as a person in a body. When I have talked with them as a spirit, they could not tell that I was not a spirit myself, in a form just as human as theirs. That is how my inner self looked to them, because when I talked with them as a spirit, they could not see my material body.

We may conclude that we are spirits with respect to our inner self from the fact that after we depart from our bodies, which happens when we die, we are still alive and just as human as ever. To convince me of this, I was allowed to talk with almost all the people I had ever met during their physical lives, with some for a few hours, with some for weeks and months, and with some for years. This was primarily so that I could be convinced and could bear witness.

I may add here that even while we are living in our bodies, each one of us is, with respect to our own spirits, in a community with other spirits even though we are unaware of it. By means of their spirits, good people are in angelic communities and evil people are in hellish communities. Furthermore, we come into those same communities when we die. People who are coming into the company of spirits after death are often told and shown this.

Actually, we are not visible as spirits in our spiritual communities while we are living in the world, because we are thinking on the physical level. However, if our thinking is directed away from our bodies we are sometimes visible in our communities because we are then in the spirit. When we are visible, it is easy to tell us from the spirits who live there because we walk along deep in thought, silent, without looking at others, as though we did not see them; and the moment any spirit speaks to us, we disappear.

Saying that we are spirits in our inner self is the same as saying that the things that have to do with our thinking and willing are spiritual, because thinking and willing actually are our inner being. They are what make us human, and the kind of human beings we are depends on what our thinking and our willing are like.

When someone's body can no longer perform its functions in the material world in response to the thoughts and emotions of its spirit, which come to it from the spiritual world, then we say that the individual has died. This happens when the breathing of the lungs and the pumping motion of the heart have ceased. But in fact that person has not died at all. He or she is only separated from the physicality that was useful to that individual in the world. The essential person is actually still alive. I say that because it is not our bodies that make us human, but our spirits. After all, it is the spirit inside us that thinks; and thought, along with emotion, makes us human.

We can see, then, that when we die we simply move from one world into another. This is why in the inner meaning of the word, "death" means resurrection and a continuation of life. Our spirits are very closely linked with our breathing and our heartbeat. Thought links to our breathing, and love's emotion links to our heart. As a result, when these two motions in the body cease, a separation immediately occurs. It is these two motions, the respiratory motion of the lungs and the pumping of the heart, that are the essential ties. Once they are severed, the spirit is left to itself; and the body, being now without the life of its spirit, cools and decays.

The reason our spirits are very closely linked with our breathing and our heart is that all our vital processes depend on these, not only in the body as a whole, but in every part as well. After this separation, our spirit stays in the body briefly, but not after the heart has completely stopped, which occurs at different times depending on the cause of death. In some cases the motion of the heart continues for quite a while, and in others it does not. The moment it does stop, we are awakened, but only the Lord awakens us. "Being awakened" means having our spirit led out of our body and into the spiritual world. It is commonly called "resurrection."

The reason our spirit is not separated from our body until the motion of the heart has stopped is that the heart corresponds to love's emotion, which is our essential life, since all of us get our vital warmth from love. So as long as the heart and the emotions are joined, the correspondence remains, and the life of the spirit is still in the body.

I have not only been told how the awakening happens, I have been shown by firsthand experience. The actual experience happened to me so that I could have a full knowledge of how it occurs. I was brought into a state in which my physical senses were inoperative—very much, then, like the state of people who are dying. However, my deeper life and thought remained intact so that I could perceive and retain what was happening to me and what happens to people who are being awakened from death. I noticed that my physical breathing was almost suspended, and a deeper breathing, a

breathing of the spirit, continued along with a very slight and silent physical one. At first a connection was established between my heartbeat and the heavenly kingdom, because that kingdom corresponds to the human heart. I also saw angels from that kingdom, some at a distance, but two sitting close to my head. The effect was to take away all my own emotions, but to leave me still in possession of thought and higher perception. I remained in this state for several hours.

Then the spirits who were around me gradually drew away, thinking that I was dead. I sensed a sweet odor like that of an embalmed body, because when heavenly angels are present anything having to do with a corpse smells sweet. When spirits sense this, they cannot come near. This is also how evil spirits are kept away from our spirit when we are being admitted into eternal life. The angels who were sitting beside my head were silent, simply sharing their thoughts with mine. When the deceased accepts those thoughts, the angels know that the person's spirit is ready to be led out of the body. They accomplished this sharing of thoughts by looking into my face. This is actually how thoughts are shared in heaven.

Since I had been left in possession of thought and higher perception so that I could learn and remember how awakening happens, I noticed that at first the angels were examining my thoughts to see whether they were like those of dying individuals, who are normally thinking about eternal life. They wanted to keep my mind in these thoughts. I was later told that as the body is breathing its last, our spirit is kept in its final thought until eventually it comes back to the thoughts that flowed from our basic or ruling love in the world.

I was in particular allowed to perceive and even to feel that there was a pull, a kind of drawing out of the deeper levels of my mind and therefore of my spirit from my body; and I was told that this was being done by the Lord and that it is what brings about our resurrection.

When heavenly angels are with people who have been awakened they do not leave them, because they love everyone. But some spirits are simply unable to be in the company of heavenly angels very long and want them to leave. When this happens, angels from the Lord's spiritual kingdom arrive, through whom we are granted the use of light, since before this we could not see anything but could only think.

I was also shown how this is done. It seemed as though the angels rolled back a covering from my left eye toward the bridge of my nose so that my eye was opened and able to see. To the spirit, it seems as though this were actually happening, but it is only apparently so. As this covering seemed to be rolled back, I could see a kind of bright but diffused light like the light we see through our eyelids when we are first waking up. It seemed to me as though this bright, diffused light had a heavenly color to it, but I was later told that this varies. After that, it felt as though something were being rolled gently off my face, and once this was done I had access to spiritual thought. This rolling of something off the face

is an appearance, and it represents the fact that we are moving from physical thinking to spiritual thinking.

Angels take the greatest care to shield the awakening person from any concept that does not have love in it. Then they tell the individual that she or he is a spirit. After the spiritual angels have given us the use of light, they do everything for us as newly arrived spirits that we could ever wish for in that state of being. They tell us about the realities of the other life, or at least as much about them as we can grasp. However, if we are the kind of people that do not want to be taught, then once we are awakened we want to get out of the company of angels. Still, the angels do not leave us; instead we leave them.

Angels really do love everyone. They want nothing more than to help people, to teach them, to lead them into heaven. This is their highest joy. When spirits leave the company of angels, they are welcomed by the good spirits who are accompanying them and who also do all they can for them. However, if they have led the kind of life in the world that makes it impossible for them to be in the company of good people, then they want to get away from these as well. This happens as long and as many times as necessary, until they find the company of people their earthly life has fitted them for. Here they find their life; and remarkable as it may sound, they then lead the same kind of life they once led in the world.

This first stage of our life after death does not last more than a few days, though. In the following pages I will be describing how we are then brought from one state of being into another until finally we arrive either in heaven or in hell. This too is something I have been allowed to learn from a great deal of experience. I have talked with some people on the third day after their death, when the events previously described have been completed. I talked with three whom I had known in the world and told them that their funeral services were now being planned so that their bodies could be buried. When they heard this, they were struck with a kind of bewilderment. They said that they were alive, and that what was being buried had been useful to them only in the material world. Later on, they were quite amazed at the fact that while they had been living in their bodies they had not believed in this kind of life after death, and still more that this disbelief was shared by almost everyone in the church.

Some people during their earthly lives have not believed the soul had any life after the life of the body. When they discover that they are still alive, they are deeply embarrassed. However, people who have convinced themselves that there is no eternal life join up with others who think similarly, and they move away from people who lived in faith while on earth. Most of them link up with some hellish community because such people reject the Divine and have no use for the truths of the church. In fact, the more that we convince ourselves that the eternal life of the soul cannot be, the more we convince ourselves that nothing to do with heaven and the church is real.