

Straightening Out Misconceptions Concerning The Life After Death (3)

Last time I stopped over the question of the external circumstances of our life, my emphasis being that in themselves these do not determine whether we go to heaven or go to hell. We had been talking about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man went to hell, not because he had been wealthy but because of his selfishness. Lazarus, who in this world had sat at the gate of the rich man begging the crumbs which fell from his table, went to heaven - again, not because of the poverty he had known here but because of his attitude to his poverty. The point is important. The external circumstances of our lives do not in themselves determine where we go when we die. What matters and what decides the issue is our attitude to those external circumstances. In the midst of wealth and abundance a person can be unassuming, genuinely caring of others and completely unselfish. And in the midst of poverty a person can become bitter, envious and unwilling to share what little he has. Swedenborg takes up this point in his book, "Heaven and its wonders and Hell, from things heard and seen", at paragraph 364;

"The poor come into heaven not on account of their poverty but because of their life. Everyone's life follows him, whether he be rich or poor. There is no peculiar mercy for one in preference to another; he who has lived well is received, while he who has not lived well is rejected. Moreover, poverty leads and draws man away from heaven just as much as wealth does."

It is the life of a person which matters, and nothing else. It is not what we have believed. It is not what Church we belonged to. It is not even a matter of whether we were in this world a Christian or not. It is not a question of whether we were rich or poor, as if riches and wealth automatically disqualify us from entering heaven and as if poverty, on its part, automatically qualifies us. It is also not a question of whether we have received or participated in certain rituals or sacraments of the Church. Because they, too, are externals which, in themselves, do not materially affect things. It is the life which matters. And this is what will decide things. Who of us is unable to see the point that if a person has lived the life of a heartless scoundrel all his years here, turning to the sacraments of the Church when death is imminent, is not going to materially affect things?

And this brings us to the question of unbaptized children who die and about whom, again, there has been, and continues to be, misunderstanding. There is this idea that if a child dies unbaptized he or she cannot go to heaven. If they weren't brought within the fold of the Church on earth they cannot be received into heaven, if they die. Once again, you see, the emphasis is in an external act, as if this should determine a person's eternal destiny. We reject this as being unfair and as being inconsistent with the notion of a loving God. If people are not received into heaven the fault lies with themselves. It is because they have freely chosen to live a life which is the complete opposite of life in heaven. It is because they love their evils and their evil ways too much to give them up. No one is kept out of heaven through no fault of their own. This is so, like we saw, with regard to people who never come to know Christ or the Christian religion. It is also the case with infants and children. It is intolerable to think that through no fault of their own they should be prevented from entering heaven.

The teaching now given shows us that all infants and children who die; indeed, that all young people who die before they reach the age of rationality; go to heaven. They do so automatically and without exception. They have not, as adults can do, freely and consciously chosen a life of selfishness and evil, which is the only thing which would prevent them going to heaven. And they will remain in heaven to all eternity. Again, and from the book, *Heaven and Hell*, we read:

"It is a belief of some that only such little children as are born within the Church come into heaven, and that those born out of the Church do not. This, they say, is because the children within the Church have been baptized and by baptism have been initiated into the faith of the Church. Such are not aware that no one has heaven or faith through baptism; for baptism is merely for a sign and memorial that man is to be regenerated... Let them know therefore that every little child, wherever born, whether within the Church or outside of it, whether of pious or impious parents, is received when he dies by the Lord and educated in heaven." (para. 329).

All infants, children, and all young people who die before they reach the age of rationality, go to heaven. What, you must be asking by now, is meant by the age of rationality?

It is the age at which a person can, for himself, see the ratio between good and evil and between truth and falsity, and freely make choices between the two. And this is an ability we simply do not possess before we are adults.

We can, of course, as children and young people, see that a thing is evil or wrong because our parents point it out or because our community frowns on it or because the law forbids it. But what we are talking about so far as rationality is concerned is the ability to see and recognise for oneself how and why and in what way a thing is wrong - wrong not because of how we were brought up and what we were taught by our parents and teachers; but wrong because of the distortion we see the thing to be.

Up until we reach the age of rationality, or until we can for ourselves see the ratio between good and evil, even though we commit evil we do so as it were in ignorance, our understanding being, as yet, in obscurity. And whatever the trouble we get ourselves into so far as this world is concerned, we are not held spiritually responsible for what we have done. Our spiritual character remains largely untouched and unformed. And if, being a youth, we were to pass over to the spiritual world, we would go to heaven. We did not in this world reach an age at which we could do things, the results of which, so far as our character was concerned, would take us to hell. It is as Jesus said: "If you were blind, you would have no sin." (John 9:41). Infants, children, and young people up to the age of rationality are blind and therefore have no sin. Sin only ever arises when an evil is committed with, so to speak, "both eyes open". In fact, that's the difference between evil and sin. We use the terms at times as if they are interchangeable. But there is this distinction.

You will, perhaps, have noticed how, up to this point, I have referred to people going to heaven and becoming angels and maybe wondered how this fits in with the idea people have, and which is still taught, that angels are a race apart, created as such, directly into heaven. Nowhere, though, does the Bible say this. Nowhere. And the one passage which is called upon as suggesting angels as a higher race of beings is now known to have been incorrectly translated in the King James' Version. The passage referred to is Psalm 8, verse 5, which in King James, reads: "For Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour." The word translated as "angels" is not the word for angels at all. It is the word for God. Thus, in the more recent, Revised Standard Version, "Yet Thou hast made him little less than God."

Everyone now in heaven or in hell once lived in this world. There are no angels who were created such, directly into heaven. People who, during their life in this world have consciously striven to overcome their evils and their selfishness and to live according to God's laws become angels after death.

But they are the only angels there are. If we say that God created angels from the beginning, we are saying that He created a race of robots - a race of beings who, not from their own free choice in the matter, automatically do His will. But this is not how God operates. His purpose in creation is a heaven of angels from the human race. He, in His love, created the universe and the human race that He might bless the lives of others, apart from Himself, with all happiness. But it is enormously important to Him that we should not feel compelled to live the life He urges upon us. We must want it ourselves and consciously, freely, choose it. This is why we are born into this world where such choices may be made and such freedom exercised.

"In the Christian world" wrote Swedenborg "it is wholly unknown that heaven and hell are from the human race, for it is believed that in the beginning angels were created and heaven was thence formed; also that the Devil or Satan was an angel of light, but having rebelled, he was cast down with his crew, and thus hell was formed... (It should be known, however), that in the entire heaven there is not a single angel who was created such in the beginning, nor in hell any devil who was created an angel of light and cast down; but all, both in heaven and in hell, are from the human race: in heaven, those who lived in the world in heavenly love and faith; in hell, those who lived in infernal love and faith." (para. 311).

We like to have a bit of fun with the idea of a personal devil, complete with tail, horns and pitchfork. But there is no personal Devil; no one being as such who is the Devil. All in hell are devils. All there live a life in opposition to everything heavenly. And it is their combined influence which brings on all the misery, heartache, violence, sickness and inhumanity, in this world. If it were possible for Him to do so, God would bring all people into heaven and to the happiness of life there. The only kind of predestination there is, is predestination to heaven. Every one, everywhere, is born for heaven. But God can't bring people to heaven against their will. If He did they would hate it and resist it bitterly. So He allows hell to exist as a place preferred by those who do not wish to co-operate with Him or to live according to His laws and teaching. Hell is not the creation of an angry God who sends people there as a punishment. Hell is permitted by a loving and merciful God for people who prefer that life to the heavenly life.

The Swedenborg Program – Number 75.

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