

## **Straightening Out Misconceptions About The Life After Death (4)**

One of the points which I highlighted last time is that both heaven and hell are from the human race. There are no angels created such from the beginning, a separate race of superior beings. All who are now angels once lived in this world. They are people who, while here, genuinely strove to resist their evils and to live unselfishly. In the same way, all who are now in hell once lived in this world. But while here they chose to live selfishly, and although they may have hidden their evil thoughts, intentions and actions from other people, yet they made no attempt within themselves to resist and overcome them. Indeed they chose to love those evils, and came to do so to a degree that they could not give them up. There is, as we saw, no personal devil. Everyone in hell is a devil. That's how things are there.

It strikes us as incredible at first that people could actually prefer being in hell to being in heaven, which in fact is the case. But the reason it strikes us as incredible is that we tend so much to think of hell in terms of 'place' and as being something outside of a person. In reality, however, hell is within a person before it is outside of him. When we talk of people preferring hell, what we are talking about is people preferring the life of evil and selfishness within themselves. They prefer and love evil and hellish ways of going about things. And when we think of it in these terms, the idea of people preferring hell, or to be in hell, becomes understandable. The thing is that we all at times choose the evil and selfish option. And when we do so, we are choosing to be in hell because that's exactly what hell is all about - evil and selfishness. Indeed, when we make those choices we are in hell. People don't choose to go to hell like we might look at a travel brochure and choose between countries for our holidays. People choose to go about life in a certain way and insist on doing the same when they arrive in the spiritual world. And in so doing they bring themselves into the company of people who approach life in the same way. And that's hell.

What then, you might be asking, is hell like?

If we stop and think what it would be like to live in a community of people where everyone was totally selfish; where everyone was trying to organise everyone else, where everyone was constantly scheming for advantage over the other person; we begin to get an idea of what hell must be like. Imagine a place where no one helped another person except for what they hoped to get out of them. Imagine the mistrust and suspicion there would be! 'What's he wanting now?'

'She only did that because she wanted to find out something'. This sort of mistrust is familiar enough to us in this world. Fortunately though, and in most cases, we don't have to live with it every day and with every person with whom we have any dealings.

"Heaven" we read "is distinguished from hell in this, that heaven is doing good from good-will, and hell is doing evil from ill-will. The reason of this is that those in hell love no one but themselves, and others only so far as they see themselves in them, and them in themselves." *Arcana Caelestia 4776.*

This brings us to the question both of punishment in hell and of hell-fire, concerning both of which there are misconceptions, people not quite knowing what to think or having a distorted idea of what is involved.

It is important for us to note that all evil carries consequences for the person who wills or does it. Even in this world when we will and do evil, we bring consequences upon ourselves. Another way of saying this is that all evil invites punishment. We punish ourselves through our dishonesty or by being hypocritical or unfaithful. What is more, we are at times prepared to endure the punishment or put up with the consequences because we love those evils so much. And this is just how it is in hell. God doesn't punish people in hell and send them there as if it is some kind of torture chamber. People in hell punish themselves, and each other, through their evil desires and actions. And yet they are prepared to endure all of this because they love their evils so much and cannot bear to give them up. What is different about this world and hell is that here, so very often, the innocent suffer the actions of the evil. In hell, because all there are similarly inclined, there is no question of the innocent suffering. They would themselves, given the chance, do the thing which another has done and the consequences of which they are suffering.

Graphic as it is, the point is highlighted by Swedenborg where he wrote:

"The state of the evil in the other life shows most clearly that those who are in evil and falsity are afraid of everybody... Those who have deprived themselves of all charity wander about and flee from place to place. Those in hell take the greatest delight in punishing and tormenting one another; it is their highest gratification. Not until now has it been known that evil and falsity themselves are the cause of this, for whatever any one desires for another returns upon himself. Falsity has in itself the penalty of falsity and evil has in itself the penalty of evil, and consequently they have in themselves the fear of these penalties." (*Arcana Caelestia 391*).

"Whatever anyone desires for another returns upon himself" It's a chilling thought, isn't it? But so true! If you were to set out to destroy another person's understanding of, say, God, there is no question but that in the process you would destroy your own. "Whatever anyone desires for another returns upon himself." This is how the Old Testament law of retaliation works. "Eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth". Whatever evil you seek to do to another is wrought upon yourself.

This, then, brings us to the question of hell fire. Hellfire is the burning loves and desires for evil within people As in the prophecy through Isaiah Chapter 9, verse 18: "For wickedness burns like a fire, it consumes briars and thorns, it kindles the thickets of the forest, and they roll upward in a column of smoke." Even in our everyday conversation we talk of people aroused and of 'heated' arguments. Someone may say that they have a 'burning' desire to do something, and we know exactly what they mean. Our young people are often all 'fired' up to do something about the state of the world. Obviously they are not on fire in a physical sense. And it's the same so far as hell fire is concerned.

"It ought to be known that those who are in the hells are not in fire; the fire is an appearance. Those there are conscious of no burning, but only of a warmth like that which they had felt in the world. This appearance of fire is from correspondence, for love corresponds to fire, and all the things seen in the spiritual world are seen in accordance with correspondences."

*(Heaven and Hell 571).*

It would be one of the most widely held beliefs people have about the spiritual world that once there we lose our sexuality, being then neither male nor female. There is an old idea, revived and much in vogue again in recent years, that sexuality is a thing of the body only and that it doesn't touch the mind of a person or what we are as a person within. I can recall the debates of the 1970s on that one! Somehow, also, there is a feeling that sexuality is inappropriate where heaven and spiritual things are concerned; that it's alright for this world and for the purpose of procreation, but nothing else.

Whereas once it would be fiercely argued and adamantly insisted upon that apart from obvious physical differences men and women are the same in all respects, now there is a growing awareness and appreciation that such differences do in fact exist. Not that in any way it makes one sex superior to the other. But research is showing particular aptitudes which females possess and particular aptitudes which males possess. Differences are being recognised.

All of two hundred and more years ago, it was given Swedenborg to write, of such differences and to show that our masculinity and femininity go to the very core of our being. Indeed, physical differences between the sexes are but the outer manifestation of the deep psychological and emotional differences which exist between the two.

The removal of the earthly, physical body, which is what happens at death, doesn't alter at all either the personality or the sexuality of a person. We remain male or female according to what we were in this world. A man is a man as before. A woman is a woman as before, their masculinity or their femininity, their ways, their characteristics, as much in evidence there as they were here. Death doesn't change this.

So different are men and women in terms of the way their minds function; as to how they approach life and its problems; as to the special emphasis each has; that they are not in the least bit alike. And although the essential sexuality of a person may be distorted or obscured as the result of upbringing or by some, malfunctioning, that sexuality cannot be changed from one to the other. The masculine mind is formed and fashioned by God to give particular emphasis to the life which inflows from Him. Similarly, the female mind is formed and fashioned in such a way to receive life from God in a particular way. Each is the complement or the partner of the other.

"Since man lives as a man after death, and man is male and female, and the masculine is one thing and the feminine another, being so different that the one cannot be changed into the other, it follows that after death the male lives as a male, and the female a female, each a spiritual being". (*Conjugal Love 32*).

In the spiritual world partners who have known and loved each other on earth resume their marriage, growing and developing and building on the foundations they laid here. This is the way God intended it to be both so far as life in this world is concerned and so far as life in heaven is concerned. Men and women continuing to complement and enrich each other in the partnership of marriage.

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