

# *Spiritual Journey Series*

**PART 3 (of Six)**



Drawn from the spiritual writings of  
Emanuel Swedenborg (1688 - 1772)

### ***Part 3 - Emanuel Swedenborg the Scientist***

*The essential purpose for these visits to other countries, as encouraged by his brother-in-law and funded by his father through an allowance, was to meet and learn from prominent men of science. Further, he was keen to learn from craftsmen about their new trades which he could introduce back in Sweden. In London, he boarded with a watchmaker, a cabinet maker and then a maker of brass instruments. He became very familiar with the processes involved. Whether he ever met Isaac Newton is uncertain but he did intensively study all his works as well as other English scientists. He acquired many instruments especially related to astronomy and mechanics. He did meet with Rev. John Flamsteed, director of the Greenwich observatory, and with the astronomer Edmund Halley.*

*After a two and a half years stay in England, he then headed for the continent. In Holland, he attended a conference to draft a treaty for settling inter-European affairs. He also spent time at a glass-making factory. In Paris, he again met with mathematicians and astronomers of note to discuss ideas. All the while, his furtive mind was bringing together potential inventions. En route back to Sweden, he stopped over in a quiet port to go through all his papers following which he completed a document comprising fourteen mechanical inventions which he had developed complete with illustrations and descriptions. They include:*

- ▶ *submarine*
- ▶ *universal musical instrument*
- ▶ *heavier-than-air flying machine*
- ▶ *method of ascertaining the desires and affections of the mind by analysis.*

*On his return to Sweden, Swedenborg took up publishing scientific discoveries and inventions, assisting the King with various projects and working with the Swedish Board of Mines.*

*(This life of Swedenborg to be continued in Part 4)*

## *What is Heaven?*

Perhaps the most widely held views by Christians are:

- ▶ populated by two kinds of beings - angels with wings and people who have been baptised;
- ▶ reward, given at death or at some future '*judgment*', for those who have professed a specific belief or been a member of a particular sect;
- ▶ inhabitants have a constant experience of the presence of God;
- ▶ it is the same for all;
- ▶ evil is totally absent;
- ▶ there is no work there, nor any recreation;
- ▶ the chief occupation is the adoration of God;
- ▶ the distinction of sex, if not abolished, constitutes no essential element of its life.

Most of these points can apparently be supported by passages from sacred scripture taken literally, inevitably leading to the deduction that some passages are right while others must be in error. Today, in this age of enlightenment, more and more thinking people are coming to realise that such understandings leave much wanting. Swedenborg's spiritual teachings run counter to almost every one of these conceptions:

a. There are no angels who were originally created as such; all are people who 'graduated' from this physical realm of existence. It is remarkable how little support can be found in Sacred Scriptures for the belief that angels and people are different beings. Wherever angels are spoken of they are described as men. *What are the qualities which make a person an angel?* The Biblical 'Two Great Commandments': "*Love the Lord your God, with heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbour as yourself*" provide an answer - a full curriculum for our life-long course

of study in this earth-school. Love the Lord. Love other people; and have a healthy respect for yourself.

b. Simply professing a particular belief/faith or having membership of any organisation does not bring any guarantees for heaven. The only thing which will bring that is starting the process of spiritual growth or regeneration well before death by working on our self, putting our belief into action and to recognise that anything good achieved is only from the power of the Divine.

c. Heaven consists essentially in the presence of God throughout the whole realm and in every heart there, not as a visible Being, but *in the inmost recesses of the soul*.

d. In so far as God is heaven, because everything that makes heaven is from God and nothing from the angels, it is the same for all. However, angels do experience heaven differently based on their love for the Divine and understanding of truth. They form themselves into communities and with the variations in these inner qualities, there are innumerable communities of angels.

e. Evil is not completely absent in heaven for nothing which has been part of our nature and memory can ever be done away with entirely. Therefore the angels carry any evils with them into heaven, but these are kept in subjection and quiescence by divine power. At times these evils are permitted to enter in some measure, into their consciousness. For the angels *in themselves* are frail beings. They are not in heaven by virtue of any merit or strength of their own.

If they did not experience changes of state, not only would they make no progress, but they would be apt to imagine that they possessed heaven through some power inherent in themselves, and thus it would depart from them. They are therefore permitted to experience a remote, subconscious reactivation of their evils from time to time, and

consequently a lessening of their sense of delight in the inflowing divine life. By these alternations of state the angels are kept in continual spiritual progress, for regeneration continues to eternity.

f. Far from being a place of leisure or of continuous formal worship, heaven is a scene of constant activity. The angels have daily occupations, and find in them the chief source of their happiness. *"Heavenly love consists in loving use for its own sake"* (Swedenborg). Each angel loves the use for which he or she is fitted and in that use engages to utmost capacity. The angels have their recreations and amusements also. Unremitting application to one kind of activity, even the highest of which they are capable would overtax and dull the mind.

g. There is marriage in heaven for man is man and woman is woman, in mind as well as in body and each is meant to be the complement and partner of the other. Neither can reach the fullest perfection of which he or she is capable, except in a holy and happy union with the other. Apart from each other they are incomplete.

The different mental constitution, and the consequent need that the one should supply the deficiencies of the other, accompanies them into the other life. It cannot but be so if they are to remain themselves. Marriage therefore exists there, but a marriage in spirit, essentially a marriage of minds. Whether marriages entered into in this realm continue depend on the relative spiritual states of each partner.

There is so much more that could be said about Swedenborg's teachings on Heaven, his most well known book "Heaven and Hell" providing some 500 pages of detailed information. Two further issues ought to be commented on. Whilst usually portrayed with them, he says that wings, when referred to in sacred scripture, myths, etc. simply convey a spiritual truth to mortals, held in the constraints of time and space, of an angels ability to move swiftly from one state of being to another resulting from a change in their thoughts and feelings. Wings only began to be included in depictions of angels after 4th century AD.

Perhaps one of his most valuable contributions to our knowledge of heaven is the concept of it being a state of infinite variety. Perfection, he tells us, comes from variety not sameness. Nevertheless this endless variety is combined into one stupendous and harmonious unity, just as all the minutest cells in the physical body interrelate to all other cells for the harmony and well being of the whole body.

*Do these propositions challenge your own thoughts on how you see the heavenly state of being? Are there any with which you feel a definite affinity? If so which ones?*

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### *Is Hell a reality?*

Just as the more traditional thinking that entry to Heaven is a Reward or Prize given to those lucky people who have found special favour with God, is today being challenged, the view of Hell as a place of eternal torment and unrelenting punishment to which those who have been disobedient to God's wishes are sent, is equally being questioned. In fact, many now reject any suggestion that hell exists at all, at least as a permanent state of being.

The proposition of a place in which there is perpetual, infernal torment - *hellfire and brimstone* - is a problem where there is a belief in a God of love and compassion. *Yet, can we dismiss the reality of hell?* We only have to look around the world to see the effects of a hellish state of being; its existence is revealed in wars, suffering, and crime. There is no reason to suppose that human nature dramatically changes for the better after physical death.

The spiritual philosophy contained in Swedenborg's writings presents *Hell* as a reality, not in terms of a place where inmates are condemned by God to continual punishment to eternity, but which makes sense of it in the light of a belief in a loving God.

As described previously, Swedenborg's "*model*" of the spiritual realm allows for the continuing existence of negative, evil attitudes and approaches developed during this level of life. Even angels, those living in the heavenly state, carry evils with them although such evils are mainly kept in subjection and quiescence by divine power. In the state of being which Swedenborg terms "*hell*", evils which people carry with them predominate in their lives to such an extent that they cannot be kept in subjection but manifest themselves. In order to understand the nature of hell, it is important to understand the nature and origin of evil.

If we accept that God is infinite and unchangeable love, we must believe that evil is permitted for some good purpose. The next step in a rational understanding of the nature of evil is to see that it is nothing in itself, that is to say, it does not have an independent existence but only a derivative one. It is always the perversion and misuse of some quality or power which in its proper place and order is good.

This, however, only pushes the problem back a step. *What is the necessity for admitting into the nature of men and women the possibility of this perversion? If the universe was created by a perfectly good God, for purposes wholly good, and the creation was in itself "very good," why should the creature for whom it was created, and in whom alone these purposes could be realised, be capable of such perversion?*

Swedenborg's answer is that the creation of men and women, capable of becoming mature and fully developed spiritual beings, can only be accomplished by the provision of choice to pursue such a goal. This is what distinguishes humans from all other creatures. For choice to exist, alternative courses of action must be possible, not necessarily between good and evil but at least between a higher and a lower good.

We can conceive of a being so constituted that the delights of the senses and of the mind were so completely in God's designed order to be described as "*very good.*" But, due to lack of choice, the being would have no insight enabling discernment between higher and lower aspects

to spiritual life, and no power to choose whether to gratify the one or the other. It would therefore only be an automaton.

On the other hand, if the prompting of the higher and lower natures acted independently, and if an effort of will was needed to secure the predominance of the higher motives, then a real freedom of choice would exist. Sin (or 'missing the mark') would then lie in selecting the lower impulses.

When indulgence, self love or self centredness became rooted in the spiritual nature of people by decisions taken in life, it was capable of being transmitted to children as a tendency to the same evils. Just as we receive physical and psychological attributes from our parents, we also receive spiritual ones, both positive and negative.

However, it is an important principle in Swedenborg's spiritual teachings that no one is responsible for inherited evil tendencies nor can credit be taken for inherited good tendencies. What we are responsible for is our conduct when confronted with these inherited inclinations together with knowledge of what is good and true - the true battle of conscience. Giving in to evil tendencies, to justify them, and to seek on occasion to indulge them will cause them to become actually part of our spiritual make-up. If it happens persistently, disregarding inner warnings, there will be a gradual loss of any real difference between good and evil. In this way, we can become "*spiritually dead*".

It is solely of such "*dead*" people, Swedenborg states that hell exists. No one is really sent to hell by God. "*The Lord does not cast anyone into hell.*" (Swedenborg: "Heaven & Hell" paragraph 545). God's only concern is to help all persons to be as happy as they can be and works constantly to bring joy into the life of everyone. The state of hell is a permission of Divine mercy; a person goes of their own choice because the place and state agree with their own desires.

God works hard to bring everyone into heaven, but some people insist on resisting these efforts and reject heavenly blessings. Given a choice they prefer to live in the hellish, self centred state. They are made as comfortable as they themselves will allow. *Does this mean that hell is more like a holiday camp than a punishment?* It is certainly not God's desire to punish anyone, but those in the state of hell inflict



punishment on themselves. They are not content to accept what God wishes to give them. They burn with the desire to steal other people's blessings, and it is these burning desires which are *symbolically* represented as the fires of hell.

Hell is to burn with desire for what belongs to others, only to find that when you get it, the pleasure of the moment quickly dies and leaves you feeling empty. Others desire what belongs to you and will go to any lengths to get it. It is a life filled with bitterness, discontent, deception, cruelty and failure, a world of mental torture and frustration.

Despite these self inflicted torments, those who live in hell would not choose to live anywhere else. They have a desire to live as they do. They have no desire at all to live in heaven, for they find that it is much more of a torment to them than hell. What of the idea that those who continually spurn God's love face final extinction? It is surely impossible to conceive of a loving God who would exterminate those who refuse to live in the way wished. Surely such a God would respect people's freedom to live as they choose?

What God does do, despite their rejection of him, is to help them to be as happy as they can. *Here is a new insight indeed!* Hell is not a place where God seeks to punish evil doers, but rather a state of existence where people can live out their self centred desires within divinely permitted limits. Continuing to remain in that state is an ongoing choice for the individual concerned.

### *What makes us human?*

*List some characteristics which distinguish us from the other parts of this natural world. In what ways do these help you to see the nature of the Divine?*

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This is a question which has been given much thoughtful consideration by many philosophers and poets over the centuries. Clearly we are not human because of physical qualities which distinguish us from animals, nor because we can build convenient, spacious dwellings or make elaborate calculations, nor even because we can form general or abstract ideas and express our thought by articulate speech. These indeed are attributes of humanness, but they do not essentially constitute it. They are rather the *results* of our being human beings.

Swedenborg provides the helpful, perhaps revolutionary, thought that we are human because of a capacity to consciously and willingly receive some infinitesimal share of that Love and Wisdom which constitute the very being of God. Further, we have the ability to use this inflowing life in unselfish service to our fellow men and women. The more fully we become capable of receiving and using this divine life, the more we are human.

We are therefore not truly human by natural birth, any more than a seed is a fully grown plant. The germ of true personhood is there from birth, indeed before birth, but that germ needs to be developed. Life on earth is the field for its development. The making of the human being is a process which commences at conception and never ends in this world or the next life.

## *What is life?*

In order to really understand our humanity, we need to address this question. Swedenborg has an answer which is staggeringly simple:

*Life is love*

Dispassionate reflection will show how sensible, as well as simple, the statement is. There are two aspects in our consciousness giving shape to the incoming data by which alone we can understand life:

- ▶ *Motive:* love, affection, desire; and
- ▶ *Thought:* in which love becomes self-conscious, expresses itself and determines itself to action?

If we are at work on a dry and abstract subject, say a proposition in geometry, we are impelled by some love. It may be the love of learning, or of getting ahead in life, or of approval. If the motivational power of affection was entirely withdrawn, the intellectual operations of the mind would cease.

Is not the whole body animated by the love of self preservation, so that, for example, we do not have to think about blinking when dust threatens to get into our eye, but do so automatically? What is it that constitutes the life of animals but their love of food, propagation and the herd, and as a derivative of love the intelligence which guides them to their goals? Does a person ever feel that they are living fully unless they have free exercise of their affections?

The statement that life is love, startling as it is at first, proves to be a perfect piece of common sense, which reflection tends to make more and more self evident. If God is essentially Love, what life can be communicated to creation other than that love?

Are we then to infer from this principle that malignant or poisonous animals and plants all live from the influx of the divine life and serve a use in some form at the same time? That is Swedenborg's teaching. The same applies to bad people, evil spirits, even hell itself.

## *The Reception of Life in Freedom*

This necessarily follows if life is love. To be love at all, love must be free. Its very essence is freedom and it demands a like freedom for its object. To attempt to force an uncongenial life on a mind not fitted to receive it, by making its affections and thoughts harmonious with God's, is wholly alien to the Divine Love and Wisdom. If it were possible for God to act in such a way, it would merely throw into confusion and disorder the mind into which such incongruous elements were introduced.

There is a certain measure established in every human mind, partly due to heredity and circumstance but chiefly to its own choice, which determines the amount and quality of life that it can freely receive. This measure limits the exercise of free will at a given moment, but is capable of indefinite development. In the other life this measure is filled to the full and also continuously and everlastingly increased, but within its own degree, which cannot be permanently transcended. Therefore God works solely for human freedom and, as far as possible, through human freedom. This is the main reason why the course of the Divine Providence is so obscure.

## *Free-will and True Freedom*

*In everyday life, do you feel that you are in true freedom to choose your spiritual destiny? In what way does our own free will play a part in the process?*

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Dr. Victor Frankl, the widely read and respected psychologist, who was imprisoned by the Nazis during the Second World War has made interesting observations on the subject of freedom, concerning his wartime experiences. He said, whilst his captors could and did, take away so much from him, there was one thing they could not take away and that was his ability to choose his attitudes. They might rob him of his possessions and sense of dignity, regiment his life, but always he kept his ability to choose what his thoughts and attitudes were going to be.

This interesting observation does '*fly in the face*' of the views of some behavioural scientists who, surprisingly rule out the individual's ability to make free choices where thoughts, attitudes and courses of action are concerned. They argue that it is *heredity* and *environment* only which make us what we are, what we become, moulding us and governing us. Clearly, two very different views of humankind are highlighted here, and not only do we have here two very different views of the human being, but they involve sharply contrasting positions where personal responsibility is concerned:

- ▶ through deliberate and free choice - a free agent; or
- ▶ the product of circumstances.

The Christian position is very much one which regards the individual as a free agent with the capacity to choose to respond to Christian teaching and values; to accept or reject them. Throughout the Bible, God appeals to people, pleading at times, for their co-operation so there is no question but that the individual is regarded there as a free agent, not merely the product of heredity and environment.

Such an approach is reinforced by Swedenborg but elaborated on in much more depth, directing it all back to the Lord. In one place ("Apocalypse Explained" paragraph 349) we read:

*"A person is held in the freedom to choose, that is, to receive what is good and true from the Lord, or to receive what is evil and false from hell."*

The freedom referred to - this capacity we all have to choose what are going to be our attitudes; whether we are going to give way to baser thoughts and inclinations, and so on - *is the Lord's gift for us*. It makes one with the whole mechanism of life and with the way it reaches us from the Divine.

Life is so structured that during our years in this world we are, as to our thoughts and feelings, and with regard to the impulses which influence us, midway between heaven, and heavenly influences, on the one hand, and hell and hellish influences on the other. Neither is allowed by the Divine to exercise any undue magnetism nor attraction over us, such as to destroy a free decision on our part.

When the influences on one side are stirred up, influences from the other are awakened to counterbalance these and we, in the middle, are free to choose which to respond to. We all know how it is that when we are all set to forgive someone, thoughts come to us suggesting they don't deserve our forgiveness, and we must decide.

In another situation we may be wrongly credited for something done by another, and our conscience starts pricking us. Do we point to the mistake? That's a decision we must and can make. We are quite able to step outside the impact of our heredity and environment to do so.

*Life is so structured that we are in freedom and can choose.* We are responsible for what we become. Much as we might like to, we cannot blame it on someone else or on matters of heredity and environment as if they were all that is involved. We are in freedom to choose. We have freedom and it is something God guards and preserves. We are a free agent where choice of thoughts, attitudes and affections are concerned. We have free-will.

The exercise of freedom may lead to disorder in thought and intention, hell in the mind and hell in the body and in action. God, of necessity, permits this evil coming into our life in all its forms for reasons fully in accord with our eternal welfare. We will look at this area later.

**Tributes to  
Emanuel Swedenborg**

I admire Swedenborg as a great scientist and a great mystic  
at the same time.

**CARL JUNG**

Even my own constricted self expands to feel a  
Swedenborgian spirit world.

**JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE**



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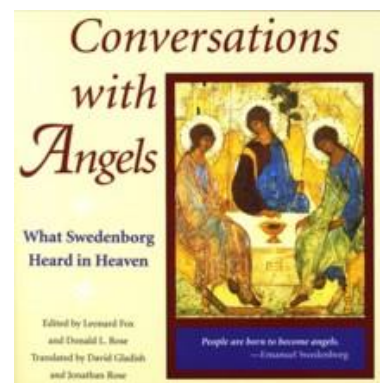
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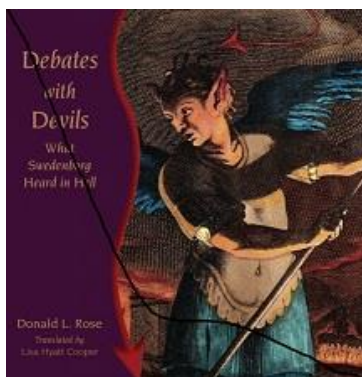


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