

Why don't people believe in life after death?

A sermon about overcoming the impediments to belief

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, September 2, 2018

“And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’³¹ 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.’” Luke 16

It is hard to believe father Abraham's assertion here. Wouldn't anyone be persuaded by that?

People who study human behavior, though, would not be surprised. Both scientific evidence and ordinary human experience testify that facts don't necessarily change people's minds. And when it comes to a belief in life after death many would argue that there are no facts. But Father Abraham says here that they wouldn't believe even if there were.

People commonly say that we believe what we want to believe, and that no one can be convinced of something against their will. This is true enough, and the *Heavenly Doctrine* explains why this is so. But this paints a bleak picture of human nature, and all of us are aware that people do change their minds. It is certainly possible to become convinced of something that we were not convinced of before. Our topic today is the dynamics of how this works.

Our feelings are like the family dog.

In many ways our opinions are like the family dog. The family dog is so loving and harmless that it is hard to imagine it as a threat or a danger. But everyone knows that dogs commonly show a very different side to strangers. Our feelings and opinions are like this. To us they seem benign and friendly, yet they can react strongly to things that they perceive as opposite or unfamiliar.

Letting someone into our house requires restraining the family dog, introducing the new person, and soon the dog will be just as friendly to them as they

are to us. The same is true of our approach to new facts. The dog gets in the way. It needs to be restrained.

But the dog performs an important use, alerting us to possible threats. The trick is how to have a guard dog that lets in the good people but keeps out the bad ones.

This is what we have here in this church. You may not have noticed, but there are guards carved into many of the entryways as you come in. They are the four living creatures from the books of Ezekiel and Revelation – which prevent anyone from approaching the Lord who does not love Him (see *Apocalypse Explained* 313). No one can get past these guards at the church entryways who is not here to worship. We sometimes ask visiting schoolchildren if they think that the guards are real, and that they actually do keep people

out who don't love the Lord. They inevitably say they aren't real.

The guards are real.

But they are real. Anyone can physically enter this space, but no one can enter the state of worship that this space stands for who does not have the love that enables them to get past the guards. This is especially true of the inner chancel, where the Lord is in His Word, and which is also guarded by these same creatures or cherubim carved into the four corners of the vaulted ceiling. If you don't approach the Word sincerely it cannot teach you anything.

The guards work both ways. We all have these guard dogs in our heads, protecting our ideas and desires from whatever might threaten them. At the



same time every valuable, beautiful and holy idea, or holy love, has its own guard, preventing anyone from accessing it who does not love it.

This is why Father Abraham said what he said, and why people don't believe in life after death. There are things standing in the way, guarding whatever our worldview happens to be. They inhibit the information from getting through and changing us.

What is it that inhibits our interest in heaven?

In our reading from "The Last Judgment" the thing especially standing in the way was identified as our interest in material things:

"Outward concerns, worldly and bodily preoccupations, had so completely taken over and filled their minds that they could not be raised into heaven's light and look beyond the things they had been taught, and so see what the church is really all about. When bodily and worldly things are loved as much as they are nowadays, nothing but utter darkness flows in from them when we try to think about heavenly realities." Last Judgment 15

The interesting thing is that our love for worldly things seems completely benign to us. We are not aware of any evil in the concerns and preoccupations that fill our minds. They mostly aren't evil, they are just natural. What we don't realize is that while this interest appears friendly and harmless to us, it jealously guards its position in our minds from anything that might displace it – just like the family dog. So when we try to think about heavenly realities there is only darkness.

The rich man in the Lord's parable was apparently immersed in these worldly and bodily things, and loved them to the exclusion of anything heavenly. The pleasures that they bring in this world mask the unhappiness that this kind of self-centered lifestyle produces, a mask that falls away after death. The result is pictured as fiery torments in the parable.

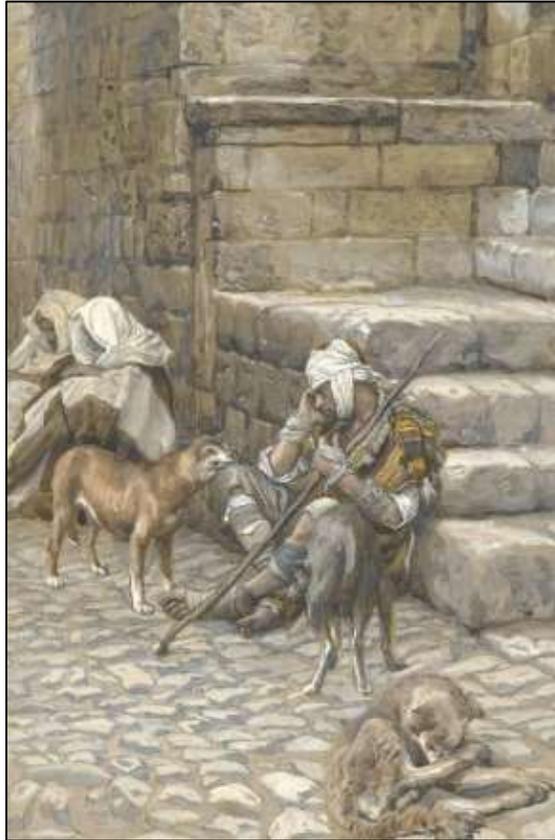
Lazarus, by contrast, experienced few pleasures, but had a good and kind heart. The inner happiness

produced in him was masked by his circumstances. We read in the *Arcana Coelestia* about this effect:

"These prevent the happiness of eternal life, which is inwardly present in him, being manifested in any other way than as a certain delight. For when that happiness passes from the inward part of his being into the cares and anxieties which reside in his outward parts, it sinks into the cares there...and becomes a kind of obscure delight. Nevertheless it is a delight which holds blessedness within it, and happiness within that. Being content in God constitutes such happiness. But once a person casts aside the body...the happiness which has been so long hidden in obscurity...comes forward and reveals itself."
Arcana Coelestia 3938

The joy that Lazarus then experienced is pictured in the parable as being "in the bosom of Abraham."

The point is that worldly loves are an impediment to heavenly joy, masking both its happiness when our circumstances are difficult, and our awareness of unhappiness, when our life is easy. They are an impediment to our willingness to believe in anything beyond this world.



Other examples of inner impediments

These kinds of inner impediments stand in the way of our willingness to learn about and love many worthwhile things in life. They also play a significant role in our relationships with other people. A story from *Spiritual Experiences* illustrates this:

"I became aware that a certain woman loved her husband, but she was prevented from acting on it by some others who talked to her persuasively and used various methods of curbing her feelings. They did this by holding her back, subtly instilling different [emotions], interfering with communication, and substituting other [feelings] that were stronger in their influence on her outer self. As soon as these [impediments] were removed, she openly and fervently expressed her love for her husband, kissing and hugging him. I said that this

was similar to how a bowstring or a spring works—when it is held back, there is an energy that presses to be let go.” Spiritual Experiences 5554

It isn't clear who these others were or how they influenced her feelings, but friends can often influence how we feel about people. When these were removed – and the story doesn't tell us how that happened – her true feelings were fervently expressed. The story compares it to the energy of a bowstring that is held back and then released. She had wanted to love her husband, but those feelings were suppressed by those others. This would also be why Lazarus' joy was so profound, having led a hard life in this world that suppressed the heavenly joy within him.

The same will be true of us if we can overcome the things that hold us back. This may be why new converts to a church are often so enthusiastic, and why people who have finally quit some bad habit that they have been struggling with are so eager to share their experience with others.

Everyone is connected to the spiritual world.

The *Heavenly Doctrines* tell us that everyone is spiritually connected to a community of people in the next life, who are the source of all of our feelings, being people who are very similar to us. We are not aware of these spiritual associations, and they are not aware of us, but the connection is very real. This community changes throughout our lifetime, as we grow and change, but in the short run their presence makes us resistant to any changes to our actions or to how we feel about things.

“Communities do not readily depart from someone with whom they have been present; but when a person with whom they are present departs they become annoyed, and they react in a way similar to the way that Laban behaved when Jacob wanted to leave him (in Genesis 31, doing everything possible to keep him from leaving).” Arcana Coelestia 4077

The truth is that it is these communities within us that are like the family dog, constantly on the watch for anything that might disturb the way that we are or what we want. They do not want us to change, because change always involves leaving them behind.

This is why people don't believe in a life after

death. Materialism inhibits their interest in it, and their spiritual community is a watchdog, causing everyone to resist any argument against what they believe, and to latch on to any argument that confirms them.

But people do change their minds.

But people do change their minds. It is possible to restrain the dog and let in new ideas. The truth is that we are not simply the pawns of our inner spiritual community. We are free to decide what we believe and what we love. We all have the ability to stand apart from what feels right or wrong to us, and to consider whether it really is right or wrong.

There are two things that especially facilitate this.

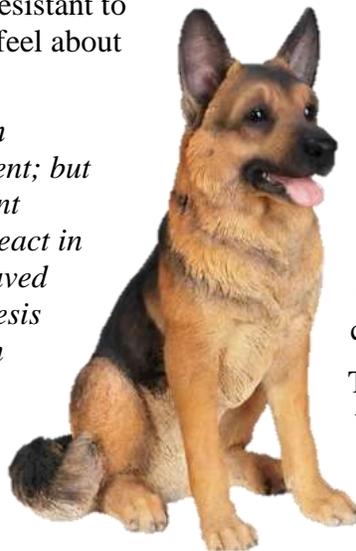
One of these things is the experiences of hardship that most people go through at times in their life. When someone close to us passes into the next life, its reality and importance is suddenly much closer to our heart. The impediments to belief may drop away. It is similar during times of serious illness, accidents, or other reversals of fortune that may bring our priorities into perspective. These unhappy events can sometimes quiet our family dog, and produce teachable moments.

Something similar can also happen during life's happiest moments. Falling in love can open our minds to profound insights about the meaning of life, and inspire real change in us (*Conjugal Love 302*).

The other thing that helps people change is the fact that the family dog becomes familiar with people who often come to the house. Eventually he stops barking and welcomes them. If you keep coming to church, or reading the Word, you become accustomed to the ideas that you hear, and it becomes easier to accept them. Familiarity puts your inner spiritual community at ease.

The same is true of any worthwhile change that you decide to make and then stick with. The dog becomes friendly, like the dogs that licked Lazarus' sores.

In the long run people are not convinced by dramatic demonstrations or persuasive speeches. They are convinced by the Lord through Moses and the prophets and the daily actions of their own lives. May these lead you, like Lazarus, to eternal happiness in the bosom of Abraham. *Amen*



Readings from the Word

Luke 16

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day.²⁰ But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate,²¹ desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.²² 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.²³ And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

²⁴“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.’²⁵ 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.’²⁶ 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.’

²⁷“Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house,²⁸ for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’

²⁹ Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’³⁰ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’³¹ 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.’ ”



Last Judgment 15, 17

To prevent people [from losing all belief in an afterlife] . . . the Lord has opened the deeper levels of my spirit. This has made it possible for me to talk after their deaths with all the people I have ever known during their physical lives; with some of these I have talked for days, with some for months, with some for a whole year. I have also talked with so many other people that saying there were a hundred thousand of them would be an understatement. Many of these were in the heavens and many were in the hells. Many who have died, on seeing that they are still people and are still alive as they were before, and in similar circumstances (since for all of us, our first state after death is much like the one we had in the world, though this changes gradually for us into either heaven or hell), are touched with new joy at being alive and say they had not believed it would be like this. They are also absolutely amazed that they had been so ignorant and blind about what happens to us after death, and are even more amazed that people in the church have the same ignorance and blindness, even though they of all people on the planet have access to light on such matters. Then they begin for the first time to see the reason for this blindness and ignorance—that outward concerns, worldly and bodily preoccupations, had so completely taken over and filled their minds that they could not be raised into heaven's light and look beyond the things they had been taught, and so see what the church is really all about. When bodily and worldly things are loved as much as they are nowadays, nothing but utter darkness flows in from them when we try to think about heavenly realities beyond the teachings of faith proclaimed by our church.

17 That is why almost all the people who arrive from the world are absolutely amazed to discover that they are alive and that they are just as human as ever, no different at all. . . They also wonder why people in this world have not been informed of this by means of visions. They are told by a heavenly source that this could have been done—nothing is easier when the Lord so pleases; but people who have convinced themselves of these misconceptions to the contrary would still not believe, even if they saw the visions for themselves. The Lord also indicated this (in His parable about Lazarus, where Abraham says to the rich man): “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, they will not believe even if someone rises from the dead.”