

Our Spiritual Reality: Heaven

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Genesis 1:1-2, 6-8, 31 (Kempton Translation, modified)

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² And the earth was a void and emptiness, and darkness was on the faces of the abyss. And the Spirit of God brooded upon the faces of the waters.

⁶ And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let there be a distinguishing between waters as to the waters." ⁷ And God made the expanse, and distinguished between the waters which were from under the expanse and the waters which were from upon the expanse; and it was so. ⁸ And God called the expanse Heavens.

³¹ And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.

Isaiah 57:15 (Kempton Translation, modified)

¹⁵ [T]hus says He who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, and His name is Holy: "I inhabit the high and holy place; and I am with those of a contrite and lowly spirit, to make the spirit of the lowly live, and to make the heart of the contrite live."

Matthew 18:1-5, 10 (Kempton Translation, modified)

¹ In the same hour came the disciples to Jesus, saying, "Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of the heavens?"

² And Jesus, calling a little child to Him, stood him in the midst of them, ³ and said, "Amen I say to you, unless you be turned around, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of the heavens. ⁴ Whoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of the heavens. ⁵ And whoever shall receive one such little child in My name, receives Me.

¹⁰ "See that you not despise one of these little ones; for I say unto you, that their angels in the heavens continually look at the face of My Father who is in the heavens."

Arcana Coelestia 8939:2-3

"What does it profit a person if he gains the whole world but suffers the loss of his soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

A person immersed in worldly and earthly interests does not understand this saying; for worldly and earthly interests have a stifling effect, and cause them not to believe even in the existence of eternal life.

But I can positively declare that as soon as a person dies they are in the next life, living as a spirit among spirits, and that then they seem to themselves and to all others there to be altogether like a person in the world, endowed with all the senses. I can say too that therefore the death of the body is merely a laying aside of such things as had enabled the person to serve and function in the world, and in addition that death itself is a continuation of life, though in another world which is not visible to the eyes of the earthly body but is visible there in light a thousand times brighter than midday light in the world. Let anyone who wishes to be happy for evermore know and believe that they are going to be alive after death; let them think about it and remember it, for it is the truth. Let them also know and believe that the Word is the one and only teacher of how a person should live in the world in order to be happy for evermore.

Introduction

- You might not learn much today.
- We're going to be talking about heaven and maybe you already know a lot about heaven.
 - So you might not actually hear anything today that you haven't heard before.
- Why are we talking about it, then?
 - The passage we read in the lessons said that anyone who wants to be happy forever should know and believe that they are going to be alive after death and it says that people should "think about it and remember it."
 - So that's what we're going to try to do today.
- And I am also hoping that you might gain a fresh appreciation of what you already know about heaven.
 - I'm hoping it will be like when someone helps you to see something that you have with fresh eyes.
 - It's a little bit like when you've had some piece of art on your wall for years but you haven't really thought about it or noticed it in a long time.
 - And then someone comments on how much they like it and suddenly you're reminded of how nice it is.
- That's the sort of experience we're aiming for but with your beliefs about heaven.

Outline

- To gain an appreciation for what we have, we're going to imagine ourselves in two different time periods when people had very little understanding of heaven:
 - Around 20-30 AD, when the Lord was preaching on earth.
 - And around 1750, when the teachings for the New Church were first beginning to be published.
 - Once we've done that, we'll end by talking briefly about what's it like to be alive today.

Understanding Heaven When the Lord was Preaching

- Imagine that you were a Jewish farmer living in the Roman-occupied Judea 2,000 years ago.
 - What would you have believed about heaven and life after death in general?
- If you were a follower of the Sadducees, you would have believed that there was no life after death (Matthew 22:23).
 - We might be surprised today that people could believe in the five books of Moses but not believe in life after death.
- The Old Testament does have passages that talk about "the heavens" and when we read those verses we might think about life after death and heaven and angels, but the Hebrew word, *shamayim*, can just mean "the skies."
 - This is also true of the Greek word, *ouranos*.
 - And so, to remember how someone back then would have heard these words, we will translate both of them as "the skies."
- So, for example, if you were living 2,000 years ago and heard our lesson from Genesis which said, "In the beginning God created the skies and the earth," you would be thinking, "Yes, God created the sky and the earth."
 - You wouldn't be thinking about life after death; you would be thinking about how God created the up-there stuff and the down-here stuff.
 - There are passages that say things like that the skies are God's throne (e.g. Psalm 11:4), but those can be understood in a very physical way – that God lives somewhere up in the physical sky.
- Believing in the five books of Moses does not guarantee that you would believe in life after death.
- If you were a follower of the Pharisees, then you would have believed that there was life after death.
 - The Pharisees believed in the five books of Moses and also the books of the prophets and in the prophets you get more indications of there being some sort of life after death (e.g. Daniel 12).
 - But you probably would have believed that, when someone you loved died, they would be in the grave for years and years, until some vague time in the future when they would be raised from the dead to live on earth again.

- For example, when the man named Lazarus died, Jesus said to his sister, Martha, "Your brother will rise again."
 - And she said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:23, 24).
 - It seems that many Jews believed what Martha believed – that people would be raised from the dead but only at some point way in the future.

- So, if you lived back then, it seems likely that you would have had no belief in the afterlife or, at best, a very vague sense of it.
- And then, one day, let's imagine that you heard a man named Jesus as He began to preach publicly and He said, "Repent, for the kingdom of the skies is near."
 - What?
 - What did He mean by "the kingdom of the skies"?
 - There were old prophecies about a new kingdom that the Messiah would bring about.
 - And some people, like Simeon and Joseph of Arimathea, were waiting for that kingdom to come (Luke 2:25; 23:51).
 - But Jesus was talking about a kingdom of the skies, not an earthly kingdom.
 - He was also saying that it was near
 - not far away physically, not somewhere way up high and far off but close by;
 - and also not far away in time, not at some vague point in the future but now.
 - And Jesus was also saying that people needed to do something to be ready for this kingdom of the skies.

- Let's imagine that you, like thousands of other people, wanted to hear more of what Jesus had to say about the kingdom of the skies and so you were part of the multitude that followed Him around and listened to His preaching.
 - You would have heard Him say a lot about who would and who would not be ready for the kingdom of the skies.
 - "Whoever... breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of the skies; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of the skies. For I say to you, that unless your justice exceeds the justice of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of the skies" (Matthew 5:19, 20).

- "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in the skies, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:20, 21).
- Imagine being that Jewish farmer hearing the Lord say these things and trying to understand how you could store up things in the skies.
- You would also have heard Jesus tell many parables about the kingdom of the skies.
 - For example, in Luke the Lord says, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches" (13:18, 19).
 - What would you have understood about heaven from a parable like that?
 - You might have been confused for a while, but the Lord designed His parables to make sense to people who wanted to understand.
 - The more you listened, the more you would have understood.
 - And there are clear messages in the parables, even if you don't understand all the symbolism.
 - It is clear that there are people who are ready for the kingdom of the skies and there are people who are not.
 - The servants that used their master's talents well and the one that did not;
 - the wise and the foolish virgins;
 - the sheep and the goats.
 - etc.
- And there were times when the Lord was more explicit about life after death and still people at the time struggled to understand what He meant.
 - He said to His disciples, "Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterwards. In My Father's house are many dwellings; and if not, I would have told you; I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and take you to Myself, that where I am, you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know" (John 13:36; 14:2-4).
 - But His disciples didn't understand.

- Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?"
- Jesus said, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except by Me" (John 14:5, 6).
- You can imagine being one of the Lord's disciples, trying to stretch your brain to think spiritually instead of naturally and understand what the Lord was talking about.
- Along those same lines, here's another really important time that the Lord taught people about the kingdom of the skies:
 - "Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, 'The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, "See here!" or "See there!" For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you' " (Luke 17:20, 21).
 - Such an important teaching about heaven and the nature of the spiritual world and what we experience within ourselves!
 - And, again, imagine our little brains, trying to understand what it means that this kingdom that the Lord is talking about is actually within us.

Understanding Heaven When the Teachings for the New Church Were Being Published

- Alright, now we're going to fast-forward by 1,700 years.
- Now, you're an Anglican shop clerk, living in London in 1749.
- A whole lot has happened in the history of Christianity and in people's beliefs about heaven and life after death.
 - The Catholic Church has grown up and with it a huge body of theology about the afterlife.
 - There has also been the Protestant Reformation which rejected some of the Catholic teachings about the afterlife.
- And there also has been a rise in scientific study and, in certain circles, people are rejecting religious ideas as superstitious nonsense.
- In this context, a new book is published anonymously.
 - We know it today as *Arcana Coelestia* or *Secrets of Heaven*.
 - Its full title is *A Disclosure of Secrets of Heaven Contained in Sacred Scripture, or the Word of the Lord; Here First Those in Genesis, Together with Amazing Things Seen in the World of Spirits and in the Heaven of Angels*.

- You turn the title page and on the back of it you find a quote:
 - Matthew 6:33 - "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."
- And on the next page you find an introduction to what is in the book, including the author explaining that stories of what he has seen in the world of spirits and in heaven have been included at the beginning and end of each chapter and there's a little table of contents given to allow someone to jump straight to those sections if they want.
- Imagine being a person in 1749 reading that book for the first time.
 - Unlike the person from 2,000 years ago, in 1749 you would likely have been exposed to a lot of teachings about life after death and not all of them true.
 - Maybe you would have believed some of them but also been skeptical about others of them.
 - Maybe you would be wondering if the whole idea of life after death was made up by religious leaders trying to have influence over you.
- And then you read some of the secrets of heaven in this book.
- First, you read this beautiful description of the gentle process that someone goes through when they die as they are gradually awakened by angels in the spiritual world.
- Then you read about what people do once they have woken up.
 - One passage says, "Angels love everybody and above all else wish to render kindly services, to inform, and to lead a person to heaven" (*Arcana Coelestia* 315).
 - The next passage describes how a person gradually associates themselves with people who completely match the kind of life that the person had led in the world and, in so doing, they make their way towards heaven or hell (*Arcana Coelestia* 316).
- Then you read some funny stories about people who, while they lived in the world, were convinced that they would just be some sort of shadowy phantom after death, or that they would have no dimensions at all, or they didn't believe in the existence of a soul at all "because they neither see it with their eyes nor comprehend it through natural science" (*Arcana Coelestia* 443-448).
 - Then each of these people discovers how things actually are – that they are still people with bodies just spiritual bodies with none of the issues of flesh and bones (*Arcana Coelestia* 322).

- And then you get to a section on heavenly joy.
 - Again, the author tells a few stories of people who arrived in the spiritual world with false beliefs and then learned from experience how things actually are.
 - Some people believed that heaven consisted in being up high and ruling over things below and so they were allowed to experience that.
 - It says, "Then, to their shame, they began to realize that this heaven was a delusion and that heaven did not consist in being high up, but that it existed wherever the individual was in whom love and charity abided, that is, who had the Lord's kingdom within themselves. Nor did it consist in wishing to be pre-eminent, for wishing to be greater than others is not heaven, but hell" (*Arcana Coelestia* 450).
 - Others believed that heaven consisted in being the greatest but a passage says this: "Instead heaven consists in a heartfelt desire that things shall be better for others than for oneself and a desire to serve others and further their happiness, doing so with no selfish intention but out of love" (*Arcana Coelestia* 452).
 - Others believe that heaven consists in being waited on by others but actually "Angelic life consists in use, and in good deeds of charity. ... The happiness they find in [being useful] is more than can possibly be described. [A]ngelic happiness consists in use, stems from use, and is proportionate to use.... (*Arcana Coelestia* 454).
- And it just keeps going – one beautiful, mind-blowing secret of heaven after another.
 - All of these teachings are in line with what the Lord taught while He was on earth but these new secrets of heaven explain things more clearly and in more detail so that they can be rationally understood and part of a fully developed worldview and theology.
 - Years later people learned that this book was written by a man named Emanuel Swedenborg.
 - And in the New Church we believe Swedenborg's testimony that, really, it was the Lord who was revealing these secrets of heaven, with Emanuel Swedenborg acting as His servant.

Conclusion: Understanding Heaven Today

- To finish up, let's turn our attention to understanding heaven today.
- We are incredibly fortunate, compared to many people who lived before us, in that we have access to the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the teachings for the New Church.
 - We should not take this incredible wealth of information for granted.
 - Not to mention the countless sermons, and books, and sacred texts from other religious traditions, and personal accounts of near-death experiences, and many other resources, all of which can inform our understanding of heaven.
- And yet, in spite of all of those resources, it is also still very easy to wonder if heaven is even real.
 - We still can't see it with our physical eyes.
 - We still can't point to it and say "See here!" or "See there!"
- And yet there is something in us that knows that there is more to life than the treasures of this world.
 - There is something in us that, when we hear that heaven is about love and connection and being of use to others, we know that it's true.
 - There is something in us that knows that when our loved ones die they are not gone forever, or doomed to lie in the grave for thousands of years, but that they are still alive and still connected with us in our spirits.
- There is something in us that knows that the Lord Jesus Christ was speaking the truth when He taught that the kingdom of the skies – the kingdom of the heavens – is near to us.
- And there is something in us that knows – our Father, who art in the heavens, is calling us even now to repent, to humble ourselves like little children, and to enter into the joy of His heavenly kingdom, a kingdom which is already present within each of us.
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.