

Angels and Spirits

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The Lord has provided that there should be angels and spirits with each individual, and that a person should be led by the Lord through them (Heaven and Hell 247).

In today's world many people are loath to admit the existence of spirits. While ghosts and goblins come out aplenty around Halloween, and the supernatural is often used in fiction, most people do not take it seriously. Indeed, by relegating the possibility of spiritual associates to horror shows and childish events, we push the reality of the other world further away from us.

For most people, the spiritual world is the great unknown. It is not seen. It is not heard from. It cannot be scientifically explored. All of our natural tools for seeing and understanding worldly phenomena reveal nothing at all about the existence of life after death and how people there might affect us.

What's more, the idea of a spiritual reality has frequently been discredited. Spirits used to be blamed for virtually everything that could not be scientifically explained. From head-colds to earthquakes, spirits were thought to cause it all. Now that we know more about the laws of this world and natural causes, the existence and influence of spirits has been brought into question.

Also, the supernatural has always been an instrument for the unscrupulous seeking money or fame. There have been no end of fraudulent tricksters willing to dupe people who long to contact those who have passed away. Magic tricks which give the appearance of psychic ability are often employed, casting doubt upon everything not of this world.

The pity of these abuses is that they obscure the truth that life is eternal, that we will all live forever in the other world. For those who can look beyond the charlatans, for those who admit to the possibility of there being more to life than our physical bodies, there is ample evidence of the spirit world.

In the Old Testament there were strict laws against attempts to communicate with "the dead." "There shall not be found among you...one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the Lord..." (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). Now, laws are not enacted unless there has previously been a problem. It was well known, then, that it was possible to call someone from beyond the grave—and that the consequences were not good.

In the New Testament the Lord often healed people who were possessed, whose bodies were in the power of evil spirits. The evil spirit whose name was Legion, because he was many, was spoken to by the Lord, and cast into a herd of swine (see Luke 8:26-39). Myth? Or miracle?

More recently, observers have noted the "near-death experience." Amazingly similar stories are told by a wide array of people who were very close to death but then revived. They speak of

being greeted by friends or relatives, of a brilliant light and comforting warmth, of a certainty afterward that when their bodies die they will live in happiness forever.

And if we will but think about our own existence, we can see how sensible it is to believe that life goes on. For we are not our bodies. Our minds—what we think about, what we care about—define who we are. This is why love grows even when bodies deteriorate, why getting older is meant to be getting better.

If we look within ourselves, we can see more evidence of a spiritual realm. Where do those ideas come from that just pop into our heads? Where do the changes in feelings come from? In our dreams, are we just hallucinating or is there something more there? A spiritual presence?

For those with open minds, willing to consider, the Lord has given a new vision of truth of the spiritual reality which awaits us all. By means of a revelation through Emanuel Swedenborg the Lord has described the nature of the life to come and its influence upon us now. For even as the Lord has blessed us with the opportunity to be of service to our neighbors on this earth, so in the next life He continues to provide us with that source of joy. He allows the angels to participate in the wonderful process of leading people to experience the joys of heaven. Or, as the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church states, “The Lord has provided that there should be angels and spirits with each individual, and that a person should be led by the Lord through them” (*Heaven and Hell* 247).

When we die we do not evaporate or depart to a far distant realm. Our existence after we put away our bodies is more real than before. For then our inner loves come out, and our highest hopes are realized. And since our life then is but a continuation of our life here, the spiritual world is very closely connected with this world. People in the next life are no more aware of our presence than we are of theirs. But they are still with us, influencing us.

We can be aware of the presence of the hells. They are legion with us. We may joke about “the devil made me do it,” but there is some truth in the claim. For when we allow our selfish nature to take the lead, the hells are very close to us. Their presence promotes selfishness; they sway us to feel that horrible and insane actions are fine as long as they feel good. Those who have felt suicidal urges have sensed their power. Rages, the inability to keep our mouths shut even when we know that no good can come from getting in the last word, all point to the influence the hells can have. And we can also see them in depression—in feelings of worthlessness and listlessness.

Many people experience their influence at night. How common is it for a person to have trouble getting to sleep because he or she is worried about something? The person frets, tossing and turning, because of the severity of the problem and the impossibility of solving it. Then, after sleep finally comes, and the person awakes, the problem looks different. In fact, it does not look nearly as big or knotty in the light of day. Why such anxiety the night before? In part, because the evil spirits had stoked our fears, troubling us beyond all measure.

Evil spirits also distort our thinking whenever possible, confusing, obscuring, or misdirecting our thoughts. How often have we taken a position and defend it, only to realize later that what we

said made little or no sense? How could we have been so stupid? How could we have been so blind? Easily, for hell twists our thinking whenever we permit it.

Fortunately, the Lord always counterbalances any influence the hells might have with heavenly influx. There are always angels with us, angels who care more for us than for themselves. When they are near, they inspire us with healthy and uplifting feelings. From them we can feel optimistic about the future. From them we are stirred to go the extra mile for others. From them we have the ability to rise above selfishness to express love to our spouse, family, and friends.

Angels also provide us with insights and perception. Whenever we can say, “that is true, “ it is because they have shed heavenly light upon our minds. Enlightenment—our sight of the ideals or principles which should govern our lives—is actually a Divine spark provided to us by angels. They inspire us to recognize what is true, even when we may feel that we are less than brilliant.

Angels are especially active when we are in spiritual pain. When we are tempted, or struggling, they strive to diminish the hellish influences we are feeling. They also call forth the truths we believe and the goods we have made our own to help us overcome the temptation. They uphold us lest we “dash our feet against stones” (see Psalm 91:12).

These spiritual influences are so important that without them we would have no source for our thinking and imagination. We would have no ability to feel and live. For the Lord uses these people in the other world as His agents to lead and guide us. And without them we would be cut off from an essential source of spiritual nourishment.

But this does not mean that we are controlled by people or events in the other world. They influence us, even as our culture and our friends do. But influences do not dominate over us. We have the freedom to respond to them—to follow suggestions or reject them. We can go along with the crowd or take a different path, both with natural friends and with our spiritual friends. We determine which spirits are present with us. We determine whom we are listening to.

And to preserve our freedom, the Lord has protected us against any direct contact with people from the other world. Yes, there may be times when we sense their presence—dreams, near-death experiences, or when one feels the nearness of a departed spouse—for the veil between the two worlds is very thin and can be bridged easily. But these are not sought-after experiences, like séances or the use of Ouija boards.

Indeed, we are not to seek contact with spirits. The ancient laws of the Old Testament still apply. The Lord has given us all that we need—the Word—so that we might lead heavenly lives. We do not need anything more. As He said to the Pharisees when they asked to have someone from the other world instruct them: “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Even if we were certain of contacting an angelic spirit, there is nothing he or she could add to our lives. In fact, if we did begin to listen to one—like a spiritual “Dear Abby”—it would diminish our looking to the Lord in His Word for guidance. It would create a dependency upon spirits, rather than on our own efforts to understand the truth and to do what is right.

And there are tremendous dangers associated with spirit communication. Only the evil spirits long to return to this world, where they can do harm without fear of certain punishment. So we are more likely to come into contact with them rather than with angels. And evil spirits are so devious that we often cannot tell who or what they are.

So what is the value in recognizing the part that spirits play in our lives, if we are not to contact them or be conscious of their presence? There are three main reasons.

The first is that they provide us with a sense of continuity. By recognizing that life goes on, and that the life that goes on is productive and happy, we gain a perspective on what we should do here. Our contributions and usefulness are never over but only beginning. This is especially important for marriages. To know that death does not destroy but only temporarily separates, strengthens love and a commitment to marriage. To think of being reunited robs death of its finality and gives us hope.

The second value in recognizing the role spirits play is to acknowledge the tremendous support which the Lord provides for us. We are never alone. We are never in a hopeless situation. The Lord and His angels are always near, lending a silent hand, quietly guiding and helping, as much as we will allow them. No matter how depressed or sad we may be, the Lord provides immeasurable angelic support to see us through.

And the final value is in recognizing how much freedom we have. Because we are influenced by both heaven and hell, we have absolute spiritual freedom to place ourselves in one camp or the other. What is more, we do not have to take responsibility for what is not ours. As the Lord said, “not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man” (Matthew 15:11). What comes in is what evil spirits inspire. The fact that we have urges to be selfish or to break the commandments does not mean we are evil. All people experience such influences, so we do not have to judge ourselves based upon what comes into us. Our freedom is in determining what comes out.

In the same way, by recognizing that good comes from angelic influences, we can avoid taking undue credit for the good that we do. Conceit can be diminished when we acknowledge that all good is the Lord’s doing and not our own.

It is of the Lord’s Providence that we are surrounded by spiritual influences. We are placed in the center, so that we may turn this way or that. With angelic inspiration we can learn what the Word teaches. With heavenly guidance we can take small steps on the Lord’s way. And, eventually, we can join with these angels and in turn share with others the spiritual bounty we have received.

Amen.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 18:9-14; Matthew 15:1-20; *Arcana Coelestia* 5992