

Children in Heaven

Excerpt from *Window to Eternity* by Bruce Henderson, pages 67-73

Suffer little children to come unto Me,
for of such is the Kingdom of heaven. – Matthew 19:14

Headlines announce the daily tragedies:

Three Children Killed in Fire.
Teen Dies in Fiery Crash.
Liver Transplant Baby Dies.

Beyond the headlines are a myriad of private tragedies we never hear about. And beyond every one of them echo the heartbroken questions no one can answer: Why? Why did my baby have to die? Why does God let it happen?

The death of a child is one of the greatest pains to endure. It is a test of faith in a loving, merciful God.

Anyone who knows the tragedy knows doubt and anger as well as grief. But beyond the plaintive, “Why did it happen? Why me?” there comes the wondering, “Where is my child now? Is he in heaven? Is she happy? Is he well cared for? Does she miss me? Will I see him again? Will she remember us?” No one has answers, only hope.

The writings of Swedenborg offer some answers. They explain why, in God’s Providence, some children are allowed to die. They describe in such a comforting way what happens to these children, that anyone can find solace, whether a grieving parent or a stranger haunted by a newspaper story.

Swedenborg assures that those who die as children come into their spiritual life at exactly the same stage of development. They are given the most loving, tender care imaginable until they become angels. And, they all do become angels and live forever in heaven, no matter what the circumstances of their birth and life.

We grieve for a life lost before a child has a chance to live. But that child enters into a fullness of life far above what he or she ever would have known on this earth. We rightfully grieve for those left with the heartache of their loss. Nothing will ever replace that child in their lives.

But faith, however hopeful, that the child is happy, well cared for, and thriving in the loving sphere of heaven can begin to counteract grief with comfort.

Swedenborg also assures that however traumatic the death of a child is, especially for those left behind, there is no lingering trauma for the child once death is passed. A child in the spiritual world looks only forward, not back. The future we see as lost to that child is really enhanced. God sees to it that children who come into heaven do not feel sad or lost or fearful without their families and familiar environment, even though they each still have their memory.

They know they will see their families again, and they will rejoice when that time comes. But without the limits of time and space that we are used to, there is no sense of waiting or longing. The child lives only in the present, with no concern for past or future. All the eagerness, enthusiasm, and zest for life is applied to the new life in heaven. And there is plenty in that new life to keep a child busy and content.

That life, no matter how tragic its ending here, opens immediately to a bright and happy world. We are the ones plagued with the questions, “Why? Why this little child? Why me, God?” They are so quickly caught up in the love and happiness of heaven that they feel none of this anxiety.

Swedenborg’s writings are filled with insight into why children, as well as adults, come to the end of this life and awaken into their spiritual lives at such various stages of development. Often we say that people have died before their time. But the time is always right in God’s Providence. It is right for their development in this life and what they are able to do for others here; and it is right for their spiritual development and what they can do for others in that life.

We may not know what makes it right, of course, so we grieve and question. Only God can see what is best for us in this world *and* in the next. This does not mean that He wants or causes children to die. (“It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”¹) But He does allow things to happen which He does not will, for the sake of our freedom and for the sake of the spiritual potential of each one of us.

He alone knows when it is the right time for a child or adult to leave this world and come into spiritual life, and why. While we may question and doubt in our ignorance, He alone can turn that negative in this world into the ultimate positive in His spiritual kingdom.

Swedenborg notes that the one thing that determines when our time has come is us, meaning what we can do for each other, either through direct action or through the influence of our character. But our usefulness extends beyond our awareness, so that it is hard for us to understand how an “untimely death” could possibly be the right time.

Swedenborg wrote in his *Spiritual Diary*:

Concerning the durations of the life of man, why some live long, and some not so long: The life of every man is foreseen by the Lord, as to how long he will live, and in what manner; wherefore he is directed from earliest infancy with a regard to a life of eternity. The Providence of the Lord, therefore, commences from earliest infancy. The reason why some die as children, some as youths, some as adults, some in old age, are:

First, on account of use to man while he is in the world;

Second, on account of use, while he is in the world, to angels and spirits (because our internal spheres have influences on the spiritual plane, even though we cannot be aware of it);

Third, on account of use to himself in the world, either that he may be

¹ Matthew 18:14

regenerated, or that he may be let into his evils lest they live dormant and afterwards break out, which would result in his eternal ruin;

Fourth, on account of use after death and to eternity; for everyone who will be in heaven has his place there, or he has his place in hell.²

None of this may make it any easier to accept the death of a child. But the idea that there may be a reason, which we may never know but which is in the best *eternal* interest of the child, eventually may bring some comfort. Especially with a child who has suffered through illness or injury or is physically or mentally prevented from living a full life, it is nice to be able to picture him or her as a normal, happy, and healthy child growing up in a heavenly environment.

Swedenborg assures that *all* children who die do go to heaven, whether or not they had been baptized into a faith and no matter how wayward their parents or their own lives may have been. By “children” Swedenborg meant all young people under “the age of rationality,” which he considers to be eighteen for women and twenty-one for men. A loving, merciful God, in His kingdom of perfect justice, is not going to keep a child out of heaven because of circumstances beyond his or her control.

He notes that “no one gains heaven or faith by means of baptism.” Baptism is an introduction to a faith that provides the means for living a life for heaven.

Every infant, wherever he was born—within the church or outside it, of godly or of godless parents—every infant is accepted by the Lord when he dies and is brought up in heaven. According to the Divine design, he is taught and filled with affections for what is good. By means of these, he is filled with insights into what is true. Then, as he is made complete in understanding and wisdom, he is introduced into heaven and becomes an angel.

Everyone who thinks rationally is capable of understanding that no one is born for hell, but everyone for heaven; and that the individual himself is at fault for entering hell, with infants being incapable of fault as yet.³

God taught while He was in the world that, “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”⁴ And, “Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God.”⁵ By this He means that we have to take on the innocence of children—a willingness to be led by God in our lives—in order to become angels. Little children, with their special innocence and trust in others, already have that capacity. Adults, who tend to rely more on themselves, have to work harder at it.

Actually, children who die have something of an advantage, because they still have that innocence that assures them getting into heaven. The evil that can infest our lives and create such

² *Spiritual Diary (SD)*, p.5,002.

³ *Heaven and Hell (HH)*, p.329

⁴ Matthew 18:3

⁵ Mark 10:14

a struggle to pressure innocence, is not yet rooted in their lives. They come to heaven readily and naturally. Many adults have to work for it.⁶

Little children come into their spiritual life immediately after death, unlike adults, whose awakening may take as long as three days. They are taken right into heaven and entrusted to the care of angel women “who during their physical life had loved babies tenderly and had also loved God. Because they had in the world loved all babies with a maternal tenderness, they accept these as their own. And the babies, from their inborn nature, love them as though they were their own mothers. Each woman has as many infants as she wants from her spiritual parental affection.”⁷ These children are led at first into a recognition and belief that the Lord is their own father, and later into a recognition and belief that He is the Lord of everyone and therefore God of heaven and earth.⁸

Children who die come into the spiritual world at exactly the same stage of development they had reached on earth, and with the same diversity of disposition. Their lives are suddenly changed, both dramatically and happily. Infants here have to be taught to walk and talk, and their senses, such as sight and hearing, are developed through experience. In their spiritual life, all of this comes naturally and immediately. Swedenborg states that infants who come into heaven “speak the angelic tongue within a month.”⁹

They are raised in heaven, but don’t become angels until they are grown. That is a process of education and spiritual development. But because it all takes place in the sphere of heaven, each child *will* become an angel. Everything the child learns is from heaven, without any taint from hell. The instruction and development of each child is perfectly adapted to his or her individuality—something we would like to be able to do in this world but rarely can approach. Still, children in heaven are not perfect. They may misbehave or have wayward thoughts and inclinations, but they are gently corrected and they are led to see the error of their ways.

Swedenborg writes that “the Lord flows into infants’ concepts...for nothing has closed these, as is the case with adults.”¹⁰ They are receptive to everything about God and heaven, because there is nothing to cloud their understanding, nothing to keep them from doing good.

Their education is a lot different from what we are used to. There is no need for children in heaven to study much of what they would have to know on this earth—history, geography, languages. They are taught spiritual truth to prepare them for a useful life in heaven, primarily through “representations” especially adapted to their minds.

These are “so beautiful, and so filled from within with wisdom at the same time, that no one could ever believe it. In this way, step by step, an understanding is instilled into them which draws its soul from what is good.”¹¹ These “representatives may include gardens, flowers, trees

⁶ *HH*, p.330

⁷ *HH*, p.332

⁸ *HH*, p.4

⁹ *SD*, p.5,668

¹⁰ *HH*, p.336

¹¹ *HH*, p.335

laden with fruit, gates and arbors, which seem to them to be alive,”¹² just as a child on earth imagines his toys to be alive. “Within such innocent fancies they sense the presence of the Lord.”¹³

Each child has his or her own room, bed, clothing, and personal things. Swedenborg notes in his *Spiritual Diary* that they are given coins of gold or silver as rewards for hard work or good behavior, which “they carefully treasure up.”¹⁴ They also have their own copies of the written Word—the spiritual rendering of the Bible—which they are encouraged to read and study, either on their own or as part of formal instruction.

Children in heaven are never as trying as they can be on earth, although they are still children, who have to learn from mistakes and misbehavior. “When they see spots on their clothes, it is a sign that they have not been thinking well, or have done something wrong. The spots cannot be washed out. When they find out what they have done, they see their blemishes and their evils. If they get the better of them again, the spots disappear.

“When they see that any of their clothes are missing, they immediately know that they have done amiss. They examine themselves, and if they do not know what is wrong, a wife comes who tells them. If they see that there is a new garment in their room, they rejoice, because they know they have done well.

“When they see that the flowers in their little gardens become dim, or change into less attractive ones,” they also know that something in their lives is wrong. If the flowers become “better and more beautiful, they rejoice, because it is a sign that they have thought well.”¹⁵

Education is different for children who die at an older age and come into the spiritual world more advanced than infants. Those who have acquired “a good disposition from their education in the world” continue along the same course. “But children who have acquired bad habits of thought, speech, or immoral behavior and been persuaded that there is no evil in such conduct, must be restrained in the World of Spirits under an instructor who may be quite severe with them until they are ‘vastated’ of the evil.”¹⁶

All children there grow to young adulthood and remain that “age” forever as angels. At this point, “they are dressed in angelic clothes, most of which are white like linen. They are brought to a path that heads up toward heaven and are committed to angel guardians there; then they are accepted by some other angels and introduced into communities, and there into many forms of happiness.”¹⁷

At this point they also are ready for marriage. And at just the right time the young man and the young woman right for each other “meet some where as if by chance. As if by instinct, they

¹² H.L.J. Odhner, *The Spiritual World (SW)*, p.154 (see also *SD* 2844)

¹³ *SD*, p.2,844

¹⁴ *SD*, p.5,666

¹⁵ *SD*, pp.5, 664-56

¹⁶ *SW*, p.154

¹⁷ *HH*, p.519

instantly know that they are mates; and, as though from a kind of inner dictate, think within themselves, the young man, 'She is mine,' and the maiden, 'He is mine.' After this thought has dwelt for some time in the minds of both, they deliberately address each other and are betrothed."¹⁸ Soon after they are married and enter together into the joys of heavenly marriage and heaven itself.

Any parent who has lost a child should be comforted by this vision. On the other hand, Swedenborg warns that parents can turn their children against heaven by inciting the wrong behavior in this life.

I was in the street of a great city and saw little boys fighting with one another. A crowd gathered and looked on with much pleasure, and I was informed that the parents themselves urge on their little boys in such fights. The good spirits and angels who saw these things through my eyes were so averse to them that I perceived their horror, especially at the fact that the parents incite them to such things, saying that thus in their earliest age they extinguish all the mutual love and all the innocence which little children receive from the Lord, and initiate them into hatred and revenge; consequently that they deliberately shut out their children from heaven, where there is nothing but mutual love. Let parents who wish well to their children beware of such things.¹⁹

Even this extreme does not keep a child out of heaven. It just makes heaven more remote. Once in heaven, a child has everything from God on his or her side. So out of the tragedy of an infant, child, or young person taken "before his time," we gain comfort from seeing what happens to that loved one taken from us. Faith will not completely take away the pain of loss, but what we see here is perfect love and care in heaven, ideal education, absolute happiness, and finally the perfect marriage and the perfect bliss of heaven.

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¹⁸ *Conjugal Love*, p.316

¹⁹ *Ibid.*