

CHOOSING HEAVEN OR HELL



Bird's Eye View of Lesson

Our path towards an eternal home in heaven or hell is forged over a lifetime. The path towards heaven lies in following the 10 Commandments in our minds as well as our external lives. Turning away from the Commandments takes us on a path towards hell. Spiritual freedom lies in choosing between these two paths. Spirits and angels who are with us bring good and bad thoughts into our minds. We are not responsible for this stream of thoughts, but we become responsible for them as we willingly adopt them, and act on them in our lives. The Lord carefully guards our freedom to choose heaven or hell.

READINGS FROM THE WORD

As we live each day, our words and actions demonstrate choices we make between the spiritual forces in our lives. Over a life time these choices pave a path towards heaven or hell. Let's take a look at this gradual process of choosing an eternal home.

Choices

The Lord promised that if the children of Israel stayed loyal to him and His Commandments, they would inherit a land flowing with milk and honey—the land of Israel. The Lord makes the same promise to each person born today, but the reward is not a worldly one, it is the promised reward of eternal happiness in His kingdom—the kingdom of heaven. Our choice is outlined in the book of Deuteronomy:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments...that you may live...and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them...you shall surely perish (Deuteronomy 30: 15-18, parts).

Choosing a Path Through Daily Living

People determine their own life path towards heaven or hell by making choices and putting their beliefs into action. While He was in the world the Lord cautioned:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

Forging a path to heaven involves having a faith that is made living through action.

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.... [A]s for me and my house, we will serve the Lord (Joshua 14:15).



CHOOSING HEAVEN OR HELL

It Is Not Difficult to Get to Heaven

The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that this path is not as hard to follow as people might think:

That it is not so difficult to live the life of heaven as some believe.... When any thing presents itself to a person that he knows to be dishonest and unjust, but to which his mind is borne, it is simply necessary for him to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to the Divine precepts.... [W]hen a person has made a beginning the Lord quickens all that is good in him, and causes him not only to see evils to be evils, but also to refrain from willing them, and finally to turn away from them (*Heaven and Hell* 533).

Sometimes people think that in order to get into heaven they should not enjoy worldly things. But the Heavenly Doctrine tells us that going to heaven is really about what we love most, not our physical circumstances. Taking the path to heaven means recognizing the Lord as our God and resisting our tendency to love ourselves and worldly things *more than* everything else.

Since a person can live outwardly as others do, can grow rich, keep a plentiful table, dwell in an elegant house and wear fine clothing, enjoy delights and engage in worldly affairs for the sake of his occupation and business and for the life both of the mind and body, provided he inwardly acknowledges the Divine and wishes well to the neighbor, it is evident that to enter upon the way to heaven is not so difficult as many believe. The sole difficulty lies in being able to resist the love of self and the world, and to prevent their becoming dominant; for this is the source of all evils (see *Heaven and Hell* 359).

Paths in the Spiritual World

By taking these simple steps, we can develop a spiritual path leading towards the Lord.

The Lord has provided that in so far as a person allows heaven to guide his thinking and willing, the spiritual man is opened up and developed. A path is opened to heaven reaching to the Lord, and his development conforms with what is heavenly. But in so far as a person allows the world to guide his thinking and willing, to that extent his internal spiritual man is closed...(see *True Christian Religion* 401).

We Make Spiritual Choices Gradually

Our spiritual companions bring a variety of thoughts to our awareness—good and evil. We can indulge in these thoughts, (e.g. I want to read or see more of this) or we can reject thoughts (e.g. This is terrible, I'm not going to look at or read that). Our choice lies in which spiritual influences we invite to be part of our lives. Thoughts that float through our minds do not necessarily reflect what we want to think about, but originate from the spirits

CHOOSING HEAVEN OR HELL



who are with us. By repeatedly inviting one kind of spiritual influence, enjoying it, and acting on it, we become the kind of person who loves it.

Nothing is appropriated to a person that he merely thinks, or even that he thinks to will, unless at the same time he wills to such a degree as to do it when opportunity offers (*Divine Providence* 80).

The things which enter into a person's thought, and not through the thought into the will [what we deeply love], do not defile him. But the things which enter through the thought into the will defile him because they become his, for the will is the person himself (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8910).

Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man; but what comes forth out of the mouth, this defiles the man. Whatever enters into the mouth goes into the belly, and is cast out into the draught. But the things which come forth out of the mouth come forth out of the heart; and these defile the man. For out of the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies (Matthew 15:11, 17-19).

There may be times when thoughts come into our minds, and we find it difficult to shut them out. Praying to the Lord or focusing on His Word can be helpful in these situations. Reading or reciting a favorite passage from the Word has great power against evil. Learning good thinking habits can save us from many sad and distressing times in our lives.

The Lord Leads People in Freedom

The Lord guards our freedom to choose between the influence of heaven and hell. He constantly offers His love, but never forces anyone to accept it. This passage from the *Arcana Coelestia* explains what people would experience if they were to lose that freedom.

The Lord governs people by means of their freedom and restrains them as far as possible from the freedom of thinking and willing what is evil—for unless restrained by the Lord, they would be constantly hurling themselves into the deepest hell. The Lord could by means of angels use almighty force to lead a person to have good ends in view, for even if a person is surrounded by tens of thousands of evil spirits, they can be driven away in an instant, and it takes only one angel to do it. But then the person would go through such torment and hell that he could not possibly stand it, for his life would be wrenched from him (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5854).

The Lord is merciful and does everything He can to lift us up and lead us to heaven. But the Lord loves us too much to force us to choose heaven. He sees each one of us as a potential angel with unique gifts that will make heaven better for everyone. It is up to us to choose whether or not to cooperate with the Lord and realize our true potential.

All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth, to such as keep His covenant and His testimonies (Psalm 25:10).



Focus Points

Circle all answers that are true. Discuss.

1. A person's path towards heaven or hell is determined by
 - a. their belief in the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - b. choosing to follow or turn away from the 10 Commandments in their actions.
 - c. the good and evil thoughts that enter their minds.

2. People who say they believe in the Lord
 - a. are already on a path to heaven.
 - b. may be on a path to heaven.
 - c. may not be on a path to heaven.

3. People who have bad thoughts enter their minds
 - a. should be worried, because it means they will go to hell.
 - b. should not be worried. It's just a sign that evil spirits are with them.
 - c. should turn away from them, inviting the angels.

4. To become an angel in heaven, a person must
 - a. consciously choose good thoughts and reject evil thoughts.
 - b. not worry too much about what other people think of them.
 - c. ask for the Lord's help in resisting evil thoughts.

5. The Lord guards people's spiritual freedom by
 - a. not directly intervening in their lives.
 - b. constantly guarding them from hell.
 - c. providing guardian angels and evil spirits so people may choose between their influences.
 - d. allowing them to choose whatever they want to do.

6. Without spiritual protection from the Lord people would
 - a. throw themselves into hell.
 - b. stand no chance of going to heaven.
 - c. be more free to choose what they wanted to do.

7. If the Lord could instantly take away the evil spirits that are with people they would
 - a. feel as if they were being tortured.
 - b. no longer be free to choose heaven.
 - c. feel as if their life was taken from them.
 - d. be free to choose heaven.

Activity 1

WHERE WILL IT LEAD?

A Role Playing Activity



Purpose

This role playing activity is designed to foster thought about where actions lead. Group members observe a role-playing activity. They may change the storyline by stepping into the scenario and leading the action in a different direction.

How to Play

In this role playing activity, two people start acting out a scenario. Each actor decides whether to portray a person whose actions demonstrate a choice towards heaven or towards hell. Observing group members may replace an actor at any time during the scenario by entering the staging area, saying “freeze” and tapping one actor on the shoulder. The newcomer will then assume the pose and role of the actor he or she wishes to replace. The first actor withdraws and sits down with the group. The scenario continues with the new player. Actor replacement may happen repeatedly at any time throughout the activity. If you wish to discuss scenarios, set a time-limit. When the timer goes off, stop and discuss.

Scenarios for Role Playing

1. A valuable object is missing. Two people are talking about it.
2. Friends have tickets for a show. Just before they are due to leave, one feels sick and wants to stay home.
3. Someone sees a person collapse on a busy city street.
4. Two people meet as they step out of their vehicles after a car accident.
5. Someone’s iPod (calculator, wallet, *etc.*) has gone missing.
6. A person is addressing a friend after hearing gossip being passed on about him or herself.
7. Someone finds out that a friend is abusing alcohol (or drugs) and decides to confront him or her.
8. Someone feels desperate and decides to run away. A stranger meets him or her at a bus stop.
9. A tall person is sitting in front of a short person in a movie theater, blocking the shorter person’s view.



Philosopher's Chair

HUMAN FREEDOM

Activity 2

Process:

- Read the statements for discussion and decide whether or not you agree with or favor them. The Teachings from the Word can help you make up your mind.
- If you favor it, then go to the right side of the room. If you disagree, move to the left side of the room. You must take one side or the other, but you will be allowed to switch sides.
- On each side of the room is a speaker's chair. Only the person sitting in the chair can speak. Each side takes turns speaking.
- As speakers make their points, you may change sides any number of times.

Teachings from the Word:

Nothing is appropriated to a person except what is done from an affection of his or her love. Only what is from the will can be called free, for whatever a person wills or loves are he does freely. Whatever does not enter into a person's freedom has no permanence (see *Heaven and Hell* 598).

No regeneration is possible in the absence of freedom—through compulsion. It seems as though a person is acting under compulsion when he compels himself to do good, but self-compulsion is one thing, being compelled is another. Self-compulsion is a product of the freedom within him, but being compelled is a product of non-freedom (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4031).

A person ought to compel himself to do what is good and to speak what is true (*Arcana Coelestia* 1957:2).

In kingdoms where the justice and judgment are guarded, one is compelled not to speak against religion, and not to do anything against it, and still no one can be compelled to think and will in its favor (*Divine Providence* 129).

Statement for Discussion:

If people can not be regenerated by being compelled to believe what is true or to behave well, people should never be made to do anything they don't want to.

If you think that people should sometimes be made to do things, please go to the right side of the room. If you think that people should never be compelled to do things go to the left side.

Further Discussion

If you would like to continue the discussion, you could consider one of these statements:

If people are made to read the Word they are not free to choose heaven.

People should make themselves do the right thing, even when they don't want to.

MISTAKES AND HABITS



(Adapted from *From the Top of the Yardstick* by Donnette Alfelt)

We all make mistakes. Your parents and grandparents made mistakes. Your ministers and teachers make mistakes and you have made and will make mistakes. These are inevitable as we are required to make big and small choices hourly. World leaders make world changing choices every day, but in terms of eternity, their choices are no more or no less important than those you must make. In God's eyes we are all equally important. Life is about practicing to do what is right—and it does take a lifetime of practice. The most important part of all of us in what other people cannot see—that is, what goes on in our hearts and minds.

Some mistakes that seem large in your mind may not appear that way to others, and may be too small to even seem significant in the grand scheme of life. But big or small, you can learn from your errors and start each new day knowing it holds new possibilities for change and progress.

A merciful loving God created you free to make choices, knowing you would not always make the correct ones. He is merciful, and at every moment provides opportunities for new choices and growth.

Every time you do something, good or bad, you are practicing to do it again

Beware of establishing habits that interfere with the quality of your future experience. Make an effort to practice good habits which, when established, will make life easier. Consider how life even in the near future may be affected by today's choices. Consider who and where you want to be at the end of your life, and what will help you to get there.

Over time, bad habits become firmly rooted and resistant to change. They may threaten our lives. This includes not only obvious ones, like drinking and smoking, but our habitual ways of behaving and relating to others—things that seem trivial, like using sarcasm, gossiping, lying and criticizing.

Discussion or Reflection

Our minds may deny or rationalize our habits to avoid the painful truth of how they are affecting our lives. Choose a harmful habit, *e.g.* smoking, and make an honest list of possible negative effects and long term consequences. Now make a list of rationalizations for continuing and difficulties of stopping. Where can a person with this problem turn for help? Where there is a problem, what is the most loving thing that others might do for this person?

Follow Up

Make a personal inventory of your own habits. Identify ones that might have bad long term consequences. Make a plan to work on one of them. This could include reading the Word for strength and help, prayer, or finding help from other people.

TAKING IT HOME



Here are a variety of activities that can help you bring this lesson into your life.

Ideas for Journal Entries *(choose one)*

- Describe the qualities of a person who is on the path to heaven. (It may be helpful to think about a person whose qualities you admire.) Pick one quality that you want to develop in your own life, e.g. complimenting others. Write about what you plan to do when you see an opportunity to develop this quality.
- Our path to heaven or hell lies in small daily choices. The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that “all the moments of life have a series of consequences to eternity” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6490). Write about a time when you made a conscious choice to do something good or to resist a bad thought, and the consequences that this has had in your life. What may have happened if you had made a different choice?
- Use a Bible concordance or www.biblegateway.com to find passages from the Word that you think might be helpful at times when you want to refocus your thoughts on heavenly ideas and reject ideas the hells are putting in your mind. Choose one passage to write out or print and display for the week.

For Reflection

- How might you justify a choice to stand up against your friends for something right, instead of going along with what they want to do? Can it make a difference to a person’s choice for heaven or hell if they “go with the crowd” occasionally?

Spiritual Task

By the Rev. Derek Elphick

What’s in Your Suitcase?

“Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven...” (Matthew 6:20).

You’ve heard the phrase before but what are these “treasures” we’re supposed to be storing up in heaven? Spiritual treasures are the spiritual values we put into practice and make a habit. Quite literally, we lay up treasures in heaven every time we act with sincerity, integrity, and honesty; whenever we make the effort to be kind, generous, and thoughtful toward others; whenever we use our talents and are useful to society.

Of course, in order to lay up treasures in heaven you need to **A.C.T.**, that is, you need the right **A**ttitude, plenty of **C**ourage from the Lord, and an unshakable **T**rust in Him. So shun the negative, fearful, suspicious thoughts and feelings you may have, the “moth and rust” (evils) which destroy, and rest content knowing that you are laying up treasures in heaven.

Further Reading

CHOICE

by the Rev. Douglas Taylor

Moses gave a beautiful speech to the Israelites before he died. He urged them over and over again to follow the Lord, to do His Commandments. If they did that, he promised, they would be happy, *really* happy. If they did not obey the Lord's Commandments, they would suffer all sorts of unhappiness. Instead of blessings, they would bring curses upon themselves.

Everything Moses said was from the Lord. The Lord told him what to say. So it was really the Lord speaking, by means of Moses. And one of the most important of all these wonderful things that the Lord said was that He was giving the Israelites a clear choice, a choice between heaven and hell. "See, I have set before you today LIFE and GOOD, death and evil" (Deuteronomy 30:15). "Life" means *heavenly* life, life in heaven. "Death" means *no* life in heaven, killing your chances of living in heaven. It does not mean the death of the body, as we usually think of death. It means living in hell to eternity.

"Life" is good. "Death"—a life in hell—is evil. And the Lord allows us to choose whichever one we like. If we want to live in heaven, we can choose that. If we really want to live in hell, we can choose that, too. We are free to choose.

But we should know what we are choosing. Heaven is good. Hell is evil. The people in heaven are *angelic* people. They LOVE to help one another. They are kind to each other. Each one treats everyone else as he himself or she herself would like to be treated. So they are deeply happy. And their happiness goes on forever.

But in hell they are always quarreling, always fighting, always struggling to get on top, always trying to rule over everyone else, always using other people for their own selfish purposes. They hate each other. Everyone there looks on everyone else as a rival. Each one loves only himself or herself. No wonder the Lord said in the Word, "There is no peace...unto the wicked" (Isaiah 48:22). Compared with the people in heaven they are *miserable*. And their misery lasts forever. Why? Because they keep on adding to it.

Now, I can almost hear you saying, "*I want to choose heaven. I don't like the sound of those people in hell. It would be terrible to live with people like that forever. So, I choose heaven.*" Well, that's good. Because that is what the LORD wants you to choose. So He said, through Moses: "Therefore, *choose life.*"

But, you know, you don't make that choice in *one* day, once and for all. You make it every day—in fact, every moment of every day. All day long the Lord sets before you

“life and good” (or heaven), and “death and evil” (or hell). But He urges you to “choose life,” to choose heaven. He doesn’t want you to go to hell. He knows that you will be happiest in heaven. So He urges you to choose heaven, all day long, everywhere, in any company.

Have you gotten into the habit of telling lies? If so, you are programming yourself for hell. But you don’t *have* to do that. You are free to choose *life* rather than *death*. You can decide every time to tell the truth, even if it seems to hurt you for a little while. If you go on lying, it will hurt you for a long while. It will hurt you forever. So, choose life, choose heaven, and be honest. Become the kind of person that people can trust.

Have you gotten into the habit of using bad language, words that you *know* you should not use? You can break that habit. You are free to choose to have heaven speaking through you, not hell. Choose life.

Have you drifted into the habit of making jokes about certain parts of the body, especially the hidden parts? Or, do you encourage others by laughing at their filthy jokes? You don’t *have* to. You are free to choose heaven. You can have a clean mind, just as you obviously want to have a clean body. Choose life.

Are you sometimes lazy? Is it too much of an effort to help people? You don’t *have* to be like that. You can choose heaven. You can come to *love* helping people. You can learn to LIVE, not just exist.

Is there someone you hate? If so, you are choosing hell, where they all hate each other. But you can stop that. You can choose heaven. You are free to look to what is good in other people, concentrating on their good points.

Do you like to get even with those who are nasty to you? If so, you are choosing hell. It is quite in order for you to stop them from making you miserable. But it is hellish to be revengeful. Choose heaven, and be forgiving, if you yourself want to be forgiven. Let the Lord be the judge of the other person.

If you do that, you will be truly free, free from punishments, free from being lectured, and free from the evils of hell, free from the curses and miseries of hell. If you keep on choosing heaven day after day, you will be *prepared* for heaven. Only then will you be truly free—free to do as you like. You see, only *angelic* people can do just as they like, because what they love to do is the same as what the *Lord* wants them to do. He doesn’t have to block them or stop them in any way. They are *free* because on earth they chose *life* all day long.

So remember that *everyday* the Lord says to you: “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.... Therefore, choose life.”

Text: Deuteronomy 30:9-20