

WHAT IS HELL LIKE?



Bird's Eye View of Lesson

Emanuel Swedenborg learned about life in hell as well as heaven. The book *Heaven and Hell* gives us a picture of hell. The Lord hopes that people will fulfill their potential to become angels, but He gives us freedom to choose between what is good—life in heaven—and what is evil—life in hell. The Old and New Testaments warn about the consequences of evil, describing people who turned away from the Lord. One of the most horrifying examples is that of the chief priests and Pharisees who plotted to kill the Lord and brought about His crucifixion. This is truly a picture of hell in action, for the hells want to destroy everything that is good and true.

READINGS FROM THE WORD

For many people in the world, the word “hell” evokes images of a fiery place with ugly misshapen creatures. What is hell really like? And why does the Lord allow people to choose to live in hell to eternity? Look for answers in today’s readings.

The Consequences of Doing Evil

The Lord gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments and other laws to help them distinguish good from evil. He also warned that choosing a life of evil has consequences.

[I]f you...break My covenant...I will appoint terror over you, wasting disease and fever which shall consume the eyes and cause sorrow of heart. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it...you shall be defeated by your enemies. Those who hate you shall reign over you, and you shall flee when no one pursues you (Leviticus 26:14-17).

The Lord wants to give us the blessings that come with following the true spiritual laws of order—the Ten Commandments—the happiness of heaven. But when people choose disorder, they choose a path that is leading towards life in hell.

Hell in Action

The New Testament gives many examples of things the Lord did showing people the way to heaven. It also shows how much people motivated by evil wanted to destroy Him. Take for example the remarkable miracle of bringing Lazarus back from the dead after he was in a tomb for four days. This miracle helped many believe in Jesus, but stirred the chief priests and Pharisees to plot against Him. In response to this miracle, they said:

“What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation...” Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death (John 11:47, 48, 53).



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The chief priests and Pharisees felt threatened by the Lord's miraculous power. Their immediate response was to take action to protect their own power by destroying Him. This example of hellish love in action reminds us that the hells and people who love evil in this world are eager to hurt what is good and true.

What Are the Devils Like?

In heaven, angels take on the physical beauty of their heavenly loves while devils and evil spirits picture hellish loves. Angels love the Lord and other people most and their beautiful human form reflects these loves. Devils are people who value worldly and selfish things more than anything else, and their ugly appearance reflects their warped loves. In the Lord's mercy, they appear normal to other people in hell. But when the light of heaven shines on them, their appearance is a true reflection of what they love.

[W]hen love of the world forms the head, a person is merely hunchbacked; while if love of self forms the head, he is not like a man standing on his feet, but like one standing on the palms of his hands with his head down...but if the love of the world or of wealth forms the head, he appears from heaven with a pale face like that of a corpse, and a yellowish circle about the head. And if love of self, or of ruling over others, forms the head, he appears from heaven with a dusky-glowing face and a white circle about the head (*True Christian Religion* 507:2,3).

Seen in the light of heaven, those in hell appear in the form of their own evil. Some are forms of contempt for others. Others are a picture of hatred, cruelty showing through from within. Yet when others praise or worship them, evil spirits almost look happy and gratified (*Heaven and Hell* 533).

Are Devils Happy?

People who choose to live in hell are happier there than they would be in heaven. But if we examine what makes devils happy, it is clear that the extent of their happiness is temporary and unfulfilling. Devils feel delight when exercising the power of their selfish loves over others.

It is granted everyone to experience the delight of his evil, provided he does not molest people moved by a delight in good. Yet because evil cannot help but molest good...to keep them from doing harm such people are removed and cast down into their places in hell... (*Divine Providence* 324:8).

Devils feel frustrated in that they can't harm the Lord and the angels. But at times they are permitted to exercise their evil loves with others who live in hell. Devils experience delight when punishing others but also may be on the receiving end.

[For example, their greatest delight] consists in their being able to punish, torture, and torment one another. They know how to introduce painful sensations just as if they were in the body, and also dreadful and horrible delusions, as well as fears and phobias (*Arcana Coelestia* 695).

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What Does Hell Look Like?

The stark ugliness of evil shows up in the homes, animals, and plants seen in hell. Depending on the quality of their evil loves, the devils and evil spirits seem to be living in caves, swamps, ruined cities, a collection of huts, or a desert. In some places dark forests are home for hellish spirits who roam like wild beasts (*Heaven and Hell* 586). Animals seen in hell include: bats, owls, wolves, panthers, tigers, rats, mice, crocodiles, and venomous snakes (see *True Christian Religion* 78:5). The plants of hell include brambles, thorns, and poisonous plants.

How the Lord Governs the Hells

Despite this ugliness, the Lord is present even with the devils in hell. He controls the attacks of hell and restrains their madness, thereby maintaining a balance between heaven and hell. Angels sometimes must be sent to stop the insanities and riots, and their presence brings things under control (see *Heaven and Hell* 543). People in hell need to be governed by the fear of punishment when they exercise their evil loves.

Another way the Lord governs the hells is by making those in hell work for their food and clothing. Angels in heaven want to help the Lord so it brings them great joy to be useful. But those in hell must work or they will go hungry. People in hell lack the enlightenment and motivation to do any job well, so they face continual frustration in their work. For example, we are told of people in hell who worked on building a church each day, but it fell apart each night. The following day they picked up the rubble and started building again. After a while they abandoned this in frustration, sitting around idle until they were forced to work for food (*Apocalypse Revealed* 153).

People Go to Hell Because They Want To

From the point of view of the evil it appears as if the Lord sends people to hell but the truth is that He lets each person choose between good and evil. Those who choose evil also choose to live in hell.

The Lord is leading every spirit toward Himself through angels and through an inflow from heaven, but...spirits who are absorbed in evil resist strenuously and virtually tear themselves away from the Lord. They are drawn by their evil—by hell, that is—as though it were a rope. Because they are drawn and want to follow because of their love of evil, it follows that they freely cast themselves into hell (*Heaven and Hell* 548).

People remain in hell to eternity, because they continue to want to do evil and hurt those who are good.

[T]hey cannot be taken out [of hell], because it cannot be given them to will good to anyone, but only, from fear of penalty, not to do evil, the desire to do it always remaining (*Arcana Coelestia* 7541:2-3).



FOCUS POINTS

Circle answers that you think are true and discuss them with your group.

1. If I experience difficult times in my life, it may be because
 - a. I am disobeying the Ten Commandments.
 - b. I am making bad spiritual choices.
 - c. the Lord has abandoned me.
 - d. the hells constantly want to draw me away from the Lord.
 - e. life requires some difficult choices.
2. When Jesus raised Lazarus, people
 - a. believed in Him.
 - b. wanted to kill Him.
 - c. worried about Him becoming a leader.
 - d. believed Lazarus had been faking death.
3. The Lord is present in the world through His Word. People, today
 - a. believe in the Word.
 - b. want to destroy the Word.
 - c. are worried about the Word having power over their life.
 - d. could care less about the Word.
4. Devils in hell appear to be
 - a. deformed or dead.
 - b. in the form of their own evil.
 - c. close to the Lord.
 - d. happy.
5. There is a hell because
 - a. the Lord loves human freedom and lets people choose to love evil more than good.
 - b. Satan is as powerful as the Lord.
 - c. the Lord cannot prevent people from putting themselves ahead of others.
 - d. devils need a place to live.
6. The Lord will not save me from going to hell if I choose to go there because
 - a. He loves my freedom.
 - b. that would be going against His rules of order.
 - c. I would be unhappy in heaven.
 - d. I deserve to be punished for my evils.
7. If a person goes to hell after he dies, he will
 - a. live there for ever.
 - b. live there for a while, and then be free to go to heaven.
 - c. repent and go to heaven.
8. Devils cannot cause people to go to hell because
 - a. they cannot force people to choose evil.
 - b. people are constantly being protected by the Lord and His angels.
 - c. people are free to choose to love the Lord and follow Him to heaven.

THE GRAND MONSTER

[Those who are motivated by love of self, love of the world, and their own evil desires] are outside the Grand Man—indeed they are in hell. They do not correspond to any organs or members within the body but to various defects and diseases.... They hate their neighbor and are ruthless in their interactions with them. When they do good it is because the law requires it or because it will benefit them in some way (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4225).

Evil spirits in the next life, are distinguished into separate communities just as good spirits are. But they are joined and held together by their having similar delusions and evil desires, so that they act together in persecuting truths and goods. So they have a common interest to hold them together. But as soon as that common interest ceases to exist one rushes at another, and their joy then consists in torturing one or more of their companions (*Arcana Coelestia* 1322).



People living in hell are not part of the Grand Man of heaven. They live instead in a monstrous human form with a structure ordered by various levels of commitment to evil. The lowest hell (which makes the head) is formed by people who love themselves above all others and who wish to rule over other people. People who live here are called devils and evil genii. People who love the world and who want to dominate others from this love are in the middle hell. They are called satans and evil spirits. People living in the highest, or mildest hell are faithless, loving to be disobedient.

Recognizing the Three Hells

The following statements illustrate the selfish attitudes of the three hells. Which of these statements seem to fit with the love of self—the love of the lowest hell? Which ones reflect the love of the middle hell—the love of the world? Which ones show a love of disobedience—the love typical of the mildest hell? Indicate your choice by putting **H** (highest or mildest hell) **M** (middle) or **L** (lowest) next to each statement.

| | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| I don't care what you think! | I don't have to do that | I want it, so I should have it! |
| Everyone should listen to me | It's mine—don't touch it | The rules don't apply to me |
| I hate you | I'll die if I don't get it! | It's not my turn! |
| I'm the most important person | I'm not listening to that | It doesn't matter what I do here |
| I'm going to kill her | Do as I say! | I don't care what the Bible says |



TORMENTS OF HELL

Activity 2

The actual evils and falsities in which people in hell are immersed are what torment them. But the torment is not due to any grief they feel because they have done evil in the past but because—since doing evil is the delight of their life—they cannot do it in the present. For when they do evil there they suffer punishment and torment at the hands of those to whom they do it. What motivates them chiefly when they do evil to one another is a desire to exercise control over others. If others do not allow themselves to be dominated, they turn to punishment and torment. But control there passes by turns from one to another, which means that those who have punished and tormented others are then themselves punished and tormented. And this goes on until eventually the fear of punishment serves to cool their ardor. Hell fire is nothing other than the cravings of self-love, which inflame and torment (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8232).

People may be tormented when they have done something they are ashamed of, or regret doing. Mental anguish, regret and self-doubt may remain long after a deed has been done, or a mistake made. The anguish may be reduced by apologizing, facing a penalty, or making some other kind of restitution.

Hell—A Different Kind of Torment

People are happy when they are free to do what they want to. Angels are happy serving the Lord and others. Devils in hell are happy when controlling other people or possessing wealth. But as soon as one devil rules over another, the persecuted devil turns on him, trying to escape domination, and instead rule over the other fellow. Each devil is able to do no more to another than was done to him—taking revenge as is said in the Old Testament “an eye for an eye!” The torment of hell is the frustration the devils feel at not being able to experience the evils that they love. In fact their punishments are so painful that eventually they become afraid of them, and their desire to do evil is therefore reduced.

Heaven or Hell

Choose one or more of the following situations to reflect on or discuss.

1. You see someone cheating on a test and don't say anything. You are later worried about it. Is your torment from heaven or hell?
2. You really want to go somewhere with a friend, but your parents don't think what you have planned is safe. You feel angry. Is your torment from heaven or hell?
3. You have broken an expensive item at a friend's house, but nobody noticed. You are frightened about being found out. Is your torment from heaven or hell?
4. Someone you love has been hit by a car and badly injured. You feel guilty because you might have prevented it. Is your torment from heaven or hell?
5. You pledge not to lie about something, and fail miserably. Is your torment from heaven or hell?

How Close Is Hell?

A Look at Values in the Media



Who does not see the necessity of separating the evil from the good [in the spiritual world], lest the latter should be infected with the contagion of deadly evil and perish? For evil is like the malignant disease which is called cancer, which spreads and gradually kills the healthy and living parts (see *Coronis* 13).

Taking a Look Around

In most cultures today people are surrounded by many messages. The messages may relate to eating or drinking certain foods, wearing particular clothing, or behaving in a way that “everyone” does. These messages may come through pictures, internet chat rooms and music, or they may simply come from watching the behavior of other people around us. How do these messages affect our thinking?

Making Changes

In August of 2006 ABC News (USA) reported on a study that showed that listening to sexually suggestive music promotes unhealthy sexual behavior in teens. In 2005 a prison in New Jersey (USA) found that changing the TV stations that prisoners could watch changed the behavior and morale of the prisoners for the better.

How Do You Feel About It?

Choose one or two of these questions to think about or discuss:

1. Compare the values you have learned in the New Church with the values presented in movies. How does watching a movie with immoral values make you feel?
2. Does looking at certain pictures or websites, hearing certain songs, or seeing movies with messages that disregard moral values affect how close you feel to your family, your friends, or to your God? Which kind of media are offensive?
3. We know that the Lord is always with us. If you could sense His close presence with you as you viewed or heard immoral messages, how would you feel?
4. If you consciously choose movies that have immoral content and enjoy them are you supporting values helpful to your spiritual life? How do you feel if you do this?
5. Does it make it easier or more difficult for angels to be with a person who is choosing to immerse his or her mind in immoral things?
6. Does it make it easier or harder for evil spirits to be with a person who is choosing to immerse his or her mind in immoral things?
7. What dangers does watching or listening to immoral media pose? How can you avoid these dangers?
8. Choose a popular conviction that you recognize to be harmful. *e.g.* what I see and hear has no effect on my life. Talk about why people buy into ideas like this.

The diseases which affect [spiritual] life are evils and...evil desires. Faith and charity make the spiritual life. This life sickens when falsity takes the place of the truth and evil takes the place of the good. For these bring spiritual death just as diseases bring the natural life to its death (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8364:2).



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

Ideas for Journal Entries *(choose one)*

- Although it is impossible for us to know whether another person is on the path to heaven or hell, there are people whose lives appear to be motivated by hellish loves. Name such a person from history (*e.g.* Adolph Hitler) and explain why this person's actions seem to picture someone determined to do evil.
- Are people who live in hell happy? Explain your answer.

For Reflection

- Paint a mental picture of negative feelings (such as revenge or envy) that can motivate you. How do the angels see you when you engage in negative feelings like these?
- Psalm 139 says that if we go to heaven, the Lord is there, and if we make our bed in hell, the Lord is also there. What kind of relationship exists between people living in hell and the Lord our God?

Spiritual Task

By the Rev. David Roth

Take My Yoke upon You

We are taught that we are to take the Lord's yoke upon us and learn from Him. The Lord says, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Unfortunately, or perhaps realistically, we all struggle under burdens. Many of our burdens are unnecessary and painful. The burden the Lord asks us to bear is said to be easy and light—keeping His commandments and striving to be useful. The burdens the hells would have us carry are heavy and difficult—feelings of shame, self-loathing, anger, contempt, envy, *etc.*

Task: This week we will begin to try breaking the yoke that we often are laboring under. The Lord teaches this: That it is not so difficult to live the life of heaven as some believe can now be seen from this, that when any thing presents itself to you that you know to be dishonest and unjust, but to which your mind is borne, it is simply necessary for you to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to the Divine teachings (*Heaven and Hell 533*).

Further Reading

HELL IS EASY TO PICTURE

by the Rev. Donald L. Rose

The New Church concept of hell is very different from the usual concepts people have. No wonder many in the world doubt that there is a hell. For they think of it as some place of fire, horrible beyond imagination—into which an angry God will cast them if they are not good.

A whole chapter of *Heaven and Hell* is devoted to the truth that “The Lord Casts No One into Hell.” And we are told directly that people in hell do not dwell in fire. They are “conscious of no burning, but only of a warmth like that which they had felt when in the world” (*Heaven and Hell* 571).

The experience of hell is in many respects like things we have already experienced. Instead of being warned about some horrible place we might go to some day, we are being told we are already in hell and that we may be saved from it! “No man can be withdrawn from his hell by the Lord unless he sees that he is in hell and wishes to be led out” (*Divine Providence* 251).

One useful way to think of hell is to think of selfishness or the love of self. We all know pretty much about selfishness, as we have observed it in others and in ourselves. We have known a kind of pleasantness that seems to go along with the love of self, but we have also sensed something of its under-lying misery. We can see examples of extremely selfish people, and we sense that they have a built-in unhappiness. “What is more restless at heart, more frequently provoked, more violently enraged than self-love and this as often as it is not honored according to the pride of its heart, and as often as anything does not succeed according to its wish and whim?” (*Divine Providence* 250:2).

As long as the love of *self* is kept in its place it has a useful part to play (*True Christian Religion* 395, 403). But there is one thing you can never do with the love of self. You can’t make a heaven out of it. It just doesn’t work. Imagine an organization or association of people in which everyone wanted only happiness for self. Each person would be thinking, “Others exist for my happiness.” The Writings say that in such a situation “what everyone wished for no one would have” (*Heaven and Hell* 403).

One passage in the Writings about such a situation shows that it is *easy* to imagine what government would be if it were based on such selfishness. The passage is from the *Arcana Coelestia*. It says that the love of self has a kind of glow in it from which people imagine that it could bring them eternal happiness. “And therefore many place eternal happiness in becoming great after the life of the body, and in being served by others, even by angels, while they themselves desire to serve no one.... Thus they carry in their hearts

the desire to become lords themselves and to rule over the universe. It is easy to conceive what kind of government this would be, when many, nay, when all, were like this. Is not that government hellish in which every one loves himself more than any other? ... There is concealed within the love of self-hatred against all who do not subject themselves to it as slaves, and because there is hatred, there are also revenge, cruelties, deceits and many other wicked things (*Arcana Coelestia* 1594:3).

We catch little glimpses of hell when we see people all striving for self alone. Even a conversation in which everyone wants the subject to reflect the glory of self, gives us a picture of hell. “He who loves himself above all things regards himself in each thing; he thinks about himself, he talks about himself, he acts for the sake of himself, for his life is a life of self” (*Heavenly Doctrine* 55).

Someone who only “regards himself personally”, we are told “is like a king who thinks that the kingdom and all the people in it exist for his sake, and not he for the sake of the kingdom and the people” (*Divine Providence* 220:8). A kingdom made of the love of self is one in which nobody will do a single thing unless he can see self-advantage in it. Otherwise he says, “Why should I do this? What do I get out of it? And therefore he does not do it” (*Heaven and Hell* 556; *True Christian Religion* 400). This is easy to picture.

It is easy to see the *contrast* of selfishness with the unselfish love of the neighbor, which the Lord gives. “Any one can see that love of the neighbor and love of self are opposite loves; for the love of the neighbor wishes well to every one from itself, while love of self wishes well to itself alone from every one; love of the neighbor wishes to serve every one, while love of self wishes every one to serve it; love of the neighbor regards every one as its brother and friend, while love of self regards every one as its servant, or as its enemy if he does not serve it; in a word, it regards itself only, and others scarcely as men, holding them in heart in less estimation than its horses and dogs. And because it regards them as of so little account it thinks nothing of doing evil to them; and this is the source of hatred and revenge, adultery and whoredom, theft and fraud, lying and defamation, violence and cruelty, and other such evils” (*Divine Providence* 276).

We were not born for this hell but for heaven. “Man is born not for the sake of himself but for the sake of others; that is, he is born not to live for himself alone, but for others” (*True Christian Religion* 406). Although we have had enough experience of selfishness to have a picture of hell, we have also had happy experiences of unselfishness from early childhood, and we know the joy of being useful. As the Writings say, we stand midway between heaven and hell (*Life* 19), and the more we learn the nature of each, the more we see the Lord inviting us away from hell into the happiness of heaven.

Text: *Arcana Coelestia* 1594:3