

**What Happens
to Children
When They Die?**

from
Heaven and Hell
by
Emanuel Swedenborg



A Unique Vision of the Afterlife

The following pages contain a brief taste of heaven based on the visions of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), a Swedish scientist and mystic. They are taken from his best-known work, *Heaven and Hell*, originally written and published in 1758 in Latin as *De Coelo et Ejus Mirabilibus, et de Inferno, ex Auditis et Visis* (Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell, Drawn from Things Heard and Seen).

Heaven and Hell is a detailed description of the afterlife based on Swedenborg's personal experiences. The work includes discussions of what happens to us after we die, what it's like to live in heaven (or in hell), and the nature of God and angels. Now celebrating its 250th anniversary, *Heaven and Hell* has been in print continuously since its first publication, and it has been translated into twenty-three languages.

This translation was produced by George F. Dole for the New Century Edition of the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg, published by the Swedenborg Foundation. The full translation includes an introduction by noted scholar Bernhard Lang, extensive notes on the text, and other helpful references. This deluxe edition is available in hardcover and full-sized paperback; there is also a smaller portable edition without the introduction and endnotes. •

Children in Heaven

Some people believe that only children born in the church get into heaven, not children born outside the church. They say this is because children born in the church are baptized and are introduced into the faith of the church by this baptism. They do not realize that no one gets either heaven or faith by baptism. Baptism serves only as a sign and reminder that we need to be reborn, and that people born in the church can be reborn because the Word is there, the Word that contains the divine truths that make regeneration possible. The church is where the Lord, who is the source of rebirth, is known.

May it be known, therefore, every child who dies, no matter where he or she was born, within the church or outside it, of devout or irreverent parents, is accepted by the Lord after death, brought up in heaven, taught according to the divine design and filled with affections for what is good and through them with direct knowledge of the truth; and then, being continually perfected in intelligence and wisdom, all such individuals are led into heaven and become angel who thinks rationally can realize that no one is born for hell—everyone is born for heaven. We ourselves are to blame if we arrive in hell, but children are not yet liable for any blame.

Children who die are still children in the other life. They have the same kind of childlike mind, the same innocence in their

ignorance, the same total delicateness—they are only in the rudiments of becoming angels; for children are not angels in being but only angels in becoming. Actually everyone who leaves this world stays in the same state of life—a baby state of a baby, a child in the state of a child, an adolescent or adult or senior in the state of an adolescent, an adult, or a senior. However, this state eventually changes. A child's state is better than the others, though, in regard to innocence, and in regard to the fact that children have not yet let evils take root in them by actually living them. The quality of innocence is such that everything heavenly can be sown in it, because innocence is the vessel of the truths of faith and the good affections of love.

The condition of children in the other life is vastly better than that of children in our world because they are not clothed with an earthly body. Instead, they have an angelic one. An earthly body is inherently heavy. It does not receive its primary sensations and primary impulses from the inner or spiritual world but from the outer or natural one; so children in this world learn by practice to walk, to do things, and to talk—even their senses, such as sight and hearing, are developed by use. It is different for children in the other life. Because they are spirits, their actions are impelled directly by their inner natures. They walk without practice and even talk, though at first this is just a matter of general affections as yet undifferentiated into mental

concepts. However, they are very soon introduced into these latter as well, since their outer natures are in such concord with their inner natures. Then too, angels' speech flows from their affections, varied by the concepts of their thought, so that their speech is in perfect agreement with the thoughts that arise from their affections.

As soon as children are reawakened (which happens immediately after their death), they are taken to heaven and given to female angels who had loved children tenderly during their physical lives and had loved God as well. Since in this world they had loved all children with a kind of maternal tenderness, they accept these new ones as their own, and the children love them as their mothers as though this were inborn in them. Each such angel has as many children as her spiritual maternal nature wants.

This heaven can be seen in the forward part of the forehead, directly on the line or radius along which angels look at the Lord. The reason for this location is that children are under the direct care of the Lord. Into them flows the heaven of innocence, which is the third heaven.

Children have different natures. Some have the nature of spiritual angels, some the nature of heavenly angels. The children of a heavenly nature appear on the right in heaven, and the ones of a spiritual nature on the left. All the children in the universal human that is heaven are in the province of the eyes, with the ones of a spiritual nature

in the province of the left eye and the ones of a heavenly nature in the province of the right eye. This is because to angels of the spiritual kingdom, the Lord appears to be in front of the left eye and to angels of the heavenly kingdom he appears to be in front of the right eye. Since children are in the province of the eye in the universal human or heaven, we can see that they are under the Lord's direct view and care.

We need to explain briefly how children are brought up in heaven. They learn to talk from their nurse. Their first speech is only the sound of their affection, which gradually becomes more articulated to the extent that the concepts they are thinking enter in, since such concepts arising from affections make up the whole angelic language.

The first things instilled into these affections (which all stem from their innocence) are the kinds of thing they see with that particularly delight them; and since these are from a spiritual origin, aspects of heaven flow into them that serve to open their deeper natures. In this way they become more perfect every day. Once this first age has been completed, they are taken to another heaven where they are taught by instructors, and so on.

Children are taught especially by images suited to their natures, images that are unbelievably lovely and full of wisdom from within. In this way, there is a gradually instilled into them an intelligence that derives its essence from goodness. I may cite at this point two examples I have been

allowed to see that will serve to suggest the nature of the rest.

At first, the Lord was pictured rising from the tomb, and along with this, the uniting of his human nature with his divine nature. This was done in such a wise manner as to surpass all human wisdom, but at the same time with a childlike innocence. The idea of a tomb was presented, but with the Lord present only so remotely that one could hardly tell that it was the Lord, as though he were far off. This was because there is a sense of death in the notion of a tomb, which they were removing by this means. Then something ethereal, something that looked faint and watery was carefully let into the tomb, referring to the spiritual life represented by baptism, again from a proper distance.

Then I saw a representation of the Lord coming down to the captives and rising with the captives into heaven, presented with incomparable care and reverence. The childlike aspect of this was that little cords were let down, almost invisible, as soft and delicate as possible, which supported the Lord in his ascent. Throughout it all, there was a holy fear lest anything in the images should touch on a matter in which there was not something spiritual and heavenly.

There were other representations that engaged the children as well—for example, plays suited to the minds of children—through which they were led into awareness of truth and affections for what is good.

I was also shown the nature of their delicate understanding. When I was saying the Lord's Prayer and they were flowing into my concepts from their own comprehension, I noticed that their inflow was so delicate and gentle that it was almost nothing but a feeling. At the same time, I noted that their understanding had been opened to the Lord, for it was as though what was coming from them was flowing through them. In fact, the Lord flows into children's concepts, primarily from the deepest ones. Nothing has closed these off, as happens with adults—no principles of falsity closing them off from true understanding, no life of evil closing them off from accepting what is good and thus from being wise.

We may gather from all this that children do not become angels immediately after their death but are gradually led [into heaven] through awareness of what is good and true, all according to the design of heaven. This is because the least details of their nature are known to the Lord, so they are led, in cooperation with every least impulse of their inclinations, toward the acceptance of truths that arise from good and the good that is done from truth.

I have also been shown how all these things are instilled using delightful and charming means that are suited to their natures. I have in fact been allowed to see children clothed most becomingly, with garlands of flowers around their chests glowing with the most charming and heavenly colors, and similar ones around their

slender arms. Once I was even allowed to see some children with their nurses, in the company of some young women in a paradisaal garden—not a garden of trees, but one with vaulted arches of something like laurels making the most intricate doorways with paths offering access inward—and the children themselves dressed with like beauty. When they entered, the flowers over the entrance radiated the most joyous light imaginable. This enabled me to gather what their delights were like and how the into the blessings of innocence and thoughtfulness by things charming and delightful, with the Lord constantly instilling blessings by means of these charming and delightful gifts.

By a means of communication that is common in the other life, I have been shown what children's concepts are like when they are looking at various objects. It is as though everything were alive; so in the smallest concepts of their thought there is an inherent life. I gathered that children on earth have concepts that are much the same when they are involved in their play, for they do not yet have the kind of reflective thought that grownups have about what is inanimate.

I mentioned earlier that children have either a heavenly or a spiritual nature. You can tell the ones of a heavenly nature from the ones of a spiritual nature very clearly. The former think and talk and act more gently, so that hardly anything is perceptible but something flowing from a love

of what is good, a love for the Lord and for other children. The latter do not think and talk and act so gently. Instead, there is something like fluttering wings that shows in them in small ways. Then too, it can be seen in their annoyance, as well as in other things.

Many people think that children remain children in heaven and are like children among the angels. People who do not know what an angel is can corroborate this opinion because of the images here and there in churches, where angels are represented as children. However, things are actually very different. Intelligence and wisdom make an angel, qualities that they do not have as long as they are children. Children are with the angels, but they themselves are not angels yet. Once they are intelligent and wise they are angels for the first time. In fact—something that has surprised me—then they no longer look like children but like adults, because they no longer have a childlike nature but a more grown-up angelic nature. This goes with intelligence and wisdom.

The reason children look more grown-up as they are perfected in intelligence and wisdom—that is, like adolescents and young adults—is that intelligence and wisdom are the essential spiritual food. So the things that nourish their minds also nourish their bodies, which is a result of correspondence, since the form of the body is nothing but an outward form of their inner natures.

It does need to be known that children in heaven do not grow up beyond the prime of youth, but remain at that age forever. To assure me of this, I have been allowed to talk with some who had been raised as children in heaven and had grown up there, with some while they were still children, and then later with the same ones when they had become youths; and I have heard from them about the course of their life from one age level to another.

We may gather from what has been presented above about the innocence of angels in heaven that innocence is the vessel of everything heavenly and therefore that children's innocence is a matrix for all the affections for what is good and true. We explained there that innocence is wanting to be led by the Lord and not by oneself, so that the extent to which we are in innocence determines the extent to which we are freed from preoccupations with our self-image. To the extent that we are freed from this self-image, we gain an identity given by the Lord. The Lord's identity is what is called the Lord's righteousness and worth.

Children's innocence, though, is not real innocence, because it still lacks wisdom. Real innocence is wisdom because to the extent that we are wise we want to be led by the Lord; or what amounts to the same thing, to the extent that we love being led by the Lord, we are wise.

So children are brought through from the outward innocence that characterizes

them at first, which is called the innocence of infancy, to the inner innocence that is the innocence of wisdom. This latter innocence is the goal of their whole process of instruction. Consequently, when they arrive at the innocence of wisdom, the innocence of infancy that had served them as a matrix in the interim is united to them.

The nature of children's innocence was portrayed to me as something woody and almost lifeless that was brought to life as the children were brought toward fulfillment by discoveries of truth and the effects of what is good. Afterward the nature of real innocence was portrayed as a supremely beautiful child, naked and very much alive. The actual innocent people who are in the inmost heaven look to the eyes of other angels simply like children, some of them naked, since innocence is portrayed as a nakedness without embarrassment, as we read concerning the first man and his wife in the garden (Genesis 2:25). So too, when they lost their innocence they were ashamed of their nakedness and hid themselves (Genesis 3:7, 10, 11).

In short, the wiser angels are, the more innocent they are; and the more innocent they are, the more they look like children. This is why infancy in the Word means innocence.

I have talked with angels about children, wondering whether they were free from evils because they did not have any realized evil the way adults do. I was told, though, that they are equally involved in evil, even

to the point that they too are nothing but evil. However, they, like all angels, are withheld from their evils by the Lord and kept focused on what is good to the point that it seems to them as though they were focused on what is good of their own accord. So to prevent children from having a false notion about themselves after they have grown up in heaven—a belief that the good that surrounds them is from them and not from the Lord—they are let back into their hereditary evils from time to time and left in them until they know and recognize and believe the way things really are.

There was one individual who had died in infancy and grown up in heaven who had this kind of opinion. He was the son of a particular king; so he was let back into his own innate life of evil. I could tell then from the aura of his life that he had a drive to lord it over others and regarded adultery as of no concern whatever—evils that were part of his heredity from his parents. Once he recognized that he was like this, though, he was again accepted among the angels he had been with before.

In the other life, none of us suffers any punishment for inherited evil, because it is not ours. We are not at fault for our hereditary nature. We suffer punishment for any actualized evil that is ours—that is, for whatever hereditary evil we have claimed as our own by acting it out in our lives.

The reason grown-up children are let back into the state of their hereditary evil is

not to punish them. It is to make sure they know that on their own they are nothing but evil and that they are borne from hell into heaven by the Lord's mercy, that they are in heaven not because they deserve it but as a gift from the Lord. This prevents them from inflating themselves over others because of the good that attends them, for this is in opposition to the blessing of mutual love just as it is against the truth of faith.

Several times a number of children have been with me in groups, before they had learned to talk at all. They made a soft, formless sound, as though they were not yet able to act together the way they would when they were older. What surprised me was that the spirits who were with me could not keep from trying to get them to talk—this kind of impulse is innate in spirits. Every time, though, I noticed that the children resisted, not wanting to talk like that. I often picked up a reluctance, a distaste, that had a kind of resentment in it. Once they did have some power of speech, all they said was "That isn't so." I was told that this is a kind of testing of the children not only to accustom and introduce them to resisting whatever is false and evil but to keep them from thinking or speaking or acting at the bidding of someone else, so that they will not let themselves be led by anyone but the Lord.

We may gather from this what the upbringing of children is like in heaven—through an understanding of truth and a

wisdom about what is good, they are led into an angelic life, which consists of love for the Lord and a mutual love in which there is innocence.

An example may serve to illustrate how different the upbringing of children on earth is in many instances. I was on the street of a large city and saw some boys fighting with each other. A crowd gathered and watched this with great delight, and I was told that the parents themselves urged their children into fights like these. The good spirits and angels who were seeing all this through my eyes were so repelled that I could feel them shudder, especially at the fact that the parents were encouraging this kind of behavior. They said that by doing this they would at the very earliest age stifle all the mutual love and all the innocence that little ones receive from the Lord and lead them into hatred and vindictiveness. So by their own deliberate practices they would shut their children out of heaven, where there is nothing but mutual love. Let any parents who wish well for their children beware of things like this.

We need also to describe the difference between people who die as children and people who die as adults. People who die as adults have a plane acquired from the earthly, material world, and they take it with them. This plane is their memory and its natural, physical sensitivity. This stays fixed and then goes dormant; but it still serves their thought after death as an outmost plane because their thinking flows

into it. This is why the nature of this plane and the way their rational activity answers to its contents determines the nature of the individual after death.

People who have died in childhood and have been raised in heaven, though, do not have this kind of plane. They have a natural-spiritual plane because they bring with them nothing from the material world or their earthly bodies. This means that they cannot be engrossed in such crude affections and consequent thoughts. They actually derive everything from heaven.

Not only that, little children are unaware that they were born on earth, so they think they were born in heaven. This means they do not know what any birth is other than the spiritual birth that is accomplished through familiarity with what is good and true and through the intelligence and wisdom that make people truly human. Since these come from the Lord, they believe that they belong to the Lord himself, and love to have it so.

However, the state of people who have grown up on earth can become just as perfect as the state of children who have grown up in heaven if they move away from the physical and earthly loves, love for themselves and love for the world, and accept spiritual loves in their stead. •

Taken from Heaven and Hell
paragraphs 329–345

Biographical Note

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) was born Emanuel Swedberg or Svedberg) in Stockholm, Sweden, on January 29, 1688 (Julian calendar). He was the third of the nine children of Jesper Swedberg (1653–1735) and Sara Behm (1666–1696). At the age of eight he lost his mother. After the death of his only older brother ten days later, he became the oldest living son. In 1697 his father married Sara Bergia (1666–1720), who developed great affection for Emanuel and left him a significant inheritance. His father, a Lutheran clergyman, later became a celebrated and controversial bishop, whose diocese included the Swedish churches in Pennsylvania and in London, England.

After studying at the University of Uppsala (1699–1709), Emanuel journeyed to England, Holland, France, and Germany (1710–1715) to study and work with leading scientists in western Europe. Upon his return he apprenticed as an engineer under the brilliant Swedish inventor Christopher Polhem (1661–1751). He gained favor with Sweden's King Charles XII (1682–1718), who gave him a salaried position as an overseer of Sweden's mining industry (1716–1747). Although he was engaged, he never married.

After the death of Charles XII, Emanuel was ennobled by Queen Ulrika Eleonora (1688–1741), and his last name

was changed to Swedenborg (or Svedenborg). This change in status gave him a seat in the Swedish House of Nobles, where he remained an active participant in the Swedish government throughout his life.

A member of the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences, he devoted himself to scientific studies and philosophical reflections that culminated in a number of publications, most notably a comprehensive three-volume work on mineralogy (1734) that brought him recognition across Europe as a scientist and philosopher. After 1734 he redirected his research and publishing to a study of anatomy in search of the interface between the soul and body, making several significant discoveries in physiology.

From 1743 to 1745 he entered a transitional phase that resulted in a shift of his main focus from science and philosophy to theology. Throughout the rest of his life he maintained that this shift was brought about by Jesus Christ, who appeared to him, called him to a new mission, and opened his perception to a permanent dual consciousness of this life and the life after death.

He devoted the last decades of his life to studying Scripture and publishing eighteen theological titles that draw on the Bible, reasoning, and his own spiritual experiences. These works present a Christian theology with unique perspectives on the nature of God, the spiritual world, the Bible, the human mind, and the path to salvation.

Swedenborg died in London on March 29, 1772, at the age of eighty-four. •