

Heaven's Main Incentive. A Classic Sermon

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Bible Reading

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him not one thing came into being that has come into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God—who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'" From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (*John 1:1–18*)

Sermon

The meaning of the Incarnation will probably never be apprehended in its fullness in this world. Because it is God's answer to man's search for the worth and significance of life, the more we contemplate its manifold wonder, the more there open new vistas, inviting inquiry and challenging perception. Its implications are so vast we feel the need of eternity to follow them.

But while we resign ourselves with reluctance to see "as through a glass, darkly" (*1 Corinthians 13:12*), there is comfort in Swedenborg's report that this sublime, divine deed is the chief delight of conversation in heaven. From this one gathers that it is heaven's main incentive.

Why not? Did not heaven itself have part in it? If "there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth" (*Luke 15:7, 10*), is it strange that there should have been jubilation over one Lord making himself the means of the redemption of the race? To be sure, in outgrowing the childish trimmings of its

former idea of heaven, our world has lost belief in its nearness and reality. The bright star, the Annunciation, the song of the angels are commonly regarded as parts of a lovely legend. But are they?

There is another world. Life is not all surface. Our thoughts and affections move in a range of reality that escapes physical measurements and that death cannot affect. Heaven is not a place beyond the clouds. It is closer to us than that. We live in it here already. Its reality is within. It is also all about, in those in whom heaven is. Consequently, there is a communion of saints. Our dear ones gone before still are near. Angels are not a special creation but “the spirits of just men made perfect” (*Hebrews 12:23*). As messengers of the Lord—which is what their name really means—they are channels through whom his love is implement-ed, his will done, and his truth given release. Together with the “great multitude that no man can number” (*Revelation 7:9*), they are concerned and have much more to do with our destinies than we know. Theirs is a world of causes, which means there is a live influx from them to us.

We say, “There is no greater power on earth than that of an idea whose time has come.” But ideas do not float in the atmosphere. They are communicated to mind from mind, and reach us through many minds, whether from this world or from the world within. Indeed, through our minds we are in the world within. Thus truth reaches us—ultimately from the mind of God— through many minds, in various degrees of illumination, according to our ability to receive it. Apart from this there would be no inspiration and no revelation.

Whence, then, the power of an idea whose time has come? There is a pressure from above—that is, from within. Swedenborg speaks of the delight of angels when they can “flow” into an idea. Would not this be heaven’s normal way of making its influence felt, and of sharing with men the treasures of its peace?

So, the kingdom of heaven is always “at hand,” awaiting our welcome. And if, at times, the pressure is so strong and human receptivity so sensitive, why could not man—destined to outlive his earthly body as a spiritual organism in perfect human form— both see and hear what comes to him from his temporarily invisible and inaudible surrounding?

Furthermore, remember that it was not only at our Lord’s Advent that heaven made itself audible and visible. There is a long record of its being articulate in the Old Testament. It is also an integral part of the faith of the New Testament and of the church from its beginning. But for our Lord’s Resurrection and the assurance of his continuing spiritual presence, there would be no Christianity today. The early Church came into being and over-came persecution through the belief—no matter how apocalyptically depicted—that a spiritual world was near; that in the world within this one lay its real battleground with the powers of darkness; that death could not annihilate the witnessing of the faithful, but that they were still part of the mighty drama. As it was at the end of our Lord’s life on earth, why not then at its beginning?

How much is lost in our Christmas joy through our sophisticated lack of belief in the reality, nearness, and concern of heaven at all times—but even more so in the days of our Lord’s Nativity! And, on the other hand, what depth and stimulation are given our worship when the event is seen in its true and glorious magnitude: embracing two worlds, encompassing past, present and future, reaching into the realm of the eternal! Christmas opens to us another world. It is not the mechanism through which heaven’s joy was made known that matters so much as that it found its way to us at all. It is not an exact answer to the question, “How did the angels know in the first place?” that is all-important, but rather

that they were sensitive to what was taking place, and that the cup of their rejoicing was so full that it spilled over onto the earth.

Indeed, if heaven's chief delight is to share the love and truth by which it lives, then one can see why it should have become articulate and burst into joy. For though "man does not live by bread alone" (*Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4*), there came a time in history when those deeper things by which men live were practically forgotten. There came a time when, on this account, mankind was in danger of perishing. What then? Would not heaven sorrow because men's hearts could no longer be reached? Because, like a dense cloud, a heavily naturalistic atmosphere prevented them from receiving what heaven had to give? Because, in other words, as men turned away from heaven, their angelic companions were deprived of their life joy and their life use?

In such a condition, would not heaven suffer and pray that a channel may be found, a path cleared, so that once more God and men might meet? Through those long years of Israel's decline and increasing materialism, is it not heaven's anguish that we hear in the lone voice of the ancient prophets? "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (*Jeremiah 17:9*). "O Lord, how long?" (*Habakkuk 1:2*). "O, that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down!" (*Isaiah 64:1*). And how else may one interpret the long interval of silence between the Old Testament and the New, when revelation ceased altogether?

Yet, it was not all anguish. And if on earth, even among a few, there still was hope such as found utterance in glorious messianic prophecies and such as was cherished in the days of the Nativity by religious minorities, surely that hope was heaven's own also, and was heaven-inspired.

Then it happened. Then the earth's need of a Savior and heaven's need of sharing its goodwill and peace found an answer. The most daring expectancies of old were fulfilled. God saw that what was wanted was more than another prophet, calling men to a change of heart and greater obedience to a set of laws. He saw that what was needed was more than a world-teacher or a new philosophy of life. The situation could no longer be resolved by means of intermediaries—unless the intermediary were to be his own adaptation to man's apprehension; the finiting of his infinity; the embodiment of his eternity in time; his own essential humanness brought forth and made manifest in a bodily life.

The situation called for nothing short of his very enactment, before men, of human life as it should be truly lived, and of his disclosure of himself as its source. So that, without thwarting our freedom, and by the sheer fascination of his love so revealed, he may draw us to himself. So that, having glorified the nature that he would assume, he may find forever a further way of entrance into our lives, dwell in us, empower us to overthrow our evils, and fashion us in his image and likeness. "He saw that there was no man and wondered that there was no intercessor; therefore his arm brought salvation" (*Isaiah 59:16*). At last, the Word that was with God and that was God, "was made flesh" (*John 1:14*).

In the Lord Jesus Christ, the God invisible made himself visible. In him God was born in the limitations of our human life, that he may be born in us. In him, at last, hope found a name, a voice, hands and feet, and wrapped itself in the innocence of a babe. In the light of that deed, life itself became illumined. Henceforth there was with men a Presence, challenging their loyalty, not to a set of abstract ideals or theories, but to a Person. There was with them a living Standard, with whom they could match their lives, and from whom they could receive strength. For heaven, it was as if a barrage blocking the way of a mighty river had suddenly been removed. For men, it was as if, in the dark clouds of a threatening sky,

a shaft of light had broken through. With Christ, in him, through him, at last, the kingdom of heaven once more was “at hand.” With him, heaven could have a part again in the redemption of the race.

Think what an exciting adventure these thirty years of our Lord’s life on earth must have been for heaven, while the fate of the world hung in the balance! Remember how close to him, through all his ministry, the angels were! Little of this is mentioned in the popular lives of Jesus with which we are familiar. But heaven was ever in the background of his thoughts, teachings, and deeds. Apart from this fact, our understanding of him remains baffling and incomplete. Heaven constantly breaks through the Gospel account—being implied even when it is not mentioned.

Angels not only sally forth into song at the time of his birth, but carry on their brave music, now in minor chords, now in triumphant keys, through all his joys and sorrows, his sufferings, temptations, and victories. They watch over him in infancy. They follow him in his formative years and all his delight in the Scriptures. They are with him at his baptism and “minister unto him” in the wilderness (*Matthew 4:11, Mark 1:13*). They are close to him when, in long night vigils, he prays on the mountainside. On a mountainside also, he graciously calls men to sense the angels’ nearness when teaching them to pray, “Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.” At the Transfiguration angel visitors are there, supporting him in his acceptance of impending struggle with physical death; in Gethsemane they strengthen him. Again, compare the exuberance of the Nativity song with their restraint on Easter morn, and you will sense that at the Cross they were near, and knew the cost of the victory.

Yes, that divine venture by which our Lord glorified his Human and returned to his eternal Fatherhood with his power to save must have been of greatest moment to our heavenly friends. It is certain that even in heaven, a whole process of enlightenment and reordering had to take place. For surely heaven could not think of God before his Incarnation as it did afterwards. Although heavenly thought of him may have been in personal terms—Love, Wisdom, and Power—still, with the glorified person of the Lord, a change took place in the Being of God himself, which made that thought still more personal and definite.

It was this change, in God and hence in the heavens, that was necessary for the redemption of the race. It is to it that we refer when we state in our Faith, “without this no mortal could have been saved.” It called for a “new heaven”; for a closer correspondence of the entire structure of heavenly life with God, now more clearly revealed and more closely present with angels and men in his Divine Humanity. Heaven, in all its component parts, now had to be fashioned into one great, corporate organism, the “Grand Man,” in the likeness of the God-Man. This was necessary so that by its influx, his church on earth may become one, the “body of Christ” (*1 Corinthians 12:27*), and the kingdoms of this world, his kingdom—a social order based on human and humane interdependence and mutuality; a striving to the perfect expression of his at-oneness with mankind. Is not this what is meant by the vision of John, in the Book of Revelation when he said, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth?” (*Revelation 21:1*).

The Lord’s presence in the heart makes heaven, within and all about, in both worlds. He is heaven’s main incentive. And heaven in its perfection is the goal to which the whole creation moves. It operates in and through us as we advance toward its perfecting. For this reason, we cannot hope to have a “new earth” apart from this “new heaven.” The new world of our hope must begin with a reordering, on the plane of the spirit, of our thoughts, aims, aspirations, and motives in accordance with what is truly human in the light of our divinely human Lord, rather than with another adjustment of the unstable

ambitions of men and nations. And the wonder of it is that, knowing these things, we can be part of this new heaven here and now.

Today there is all about us the pressure of a truth whose time has come: that the world must be one, and our group relationships expressive of what human life is at its best. It stems from our Lord's revelation of himself for this new age, and it bears in on us from heaven. Today, in the dazzling effulgence of his Divine Humanity, and through the insistent prompting of our invisible surroundings, the God-Man is challenging us to match our lives, and our ways of living together, with himself.

It will indeed be Christmas for our world when his Incarnation is thus expressed. When he, the life-incentive of our angel friends, becomes our living incentive. When with them we commit ourselves and our all to him—our one Lord and only God, the Lord God, the Savior Jesus Christ.

Prayer

O Lord God and Savior, Jesus Christ, give us the view of the angels as we approach your Incarnation, so that we may see the brilliant light and love it brings to us: the light and love of your Divine Humanity dwelling among all of humankind. Amen.