

PREPARATION FOR LIFE AFTER DEATH

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Be wakeful, therefore, for ye know not at what hour your Lord will come. But know this, that if the master of the house knew in what hour the thief would come he would be wakeful, and would not suffer him to dig through his house (Matt. 24:42-43).

Our topic is preparation for life after death. Our text from Matthew 24 says it all: “Be wakeful for ye know not at what hour your Lord will come.” Indeed, it is the Lord alone who knows at what moment the correspondence between our natural and spiritual bodies will cease and when we will find ourselves adjusting to an entirely new paradigm. This paradigm we sometimes call the other world. For it is truly an entirely new world of experience that awaits us all. Yet the spiritual world is not another parallel universe, for we know that the Lord says His kingdom is within us. Therefore, in a universal sense, we live simultaneously in two worlds, and what we call death is merely the entry point into a realm where our minds, our spirits, have always been living.

This concept of dual existence, if understood correctly, has the potential of creating an entirely distinctive mindset that has tremendous liberating, spiritual power. But the concept alone has no power unless we heed the imperative to “Be wakeful!” and this, the Writings for the New Church say, means we should be getting ready all the time (*Apocalypse Explained* 193:5). In other words, preparation for an eternal life in heaven is not a one-time event, or something that we can put off.

At the outset let it be clear that the Lord’s guardianship of our eternal life is constant. In the work *Spiritual Experiences* 5002 we read that every “person is guided from earliest infancy with eternal life in view.” In addition, despite our curiosity, there is good reason to avoid over-focusing on the precise time of our

passing. If a “man knew the hour of his death” we read, “he would get himself ready, not from a love of what is true and good, but from a fear of hell.” Natural fear can be a useful motivator at times. It can keep us out of a lot of trouble. There is also a holy reverential fear that respects the Lord and is fearful of doing spiritual harm to others. What we do from a fear of hell, however, has no staying power, whereas what we do from love becomes a permanent part of our spiritual self (ibid). This is an important principle to keep in mind as we talk about preparing for life in the spiritual world. Our goal is to get ourselves ready from a love of what is good and true and from a desire to seek our highest spiritual potential. It should not be a matter of desperate or fatalistic thinking or of hoping to peek out a mere toehold just across the threshold of heaven.

So if natural fear is NOT a good reason to be alert or watchful, what is a good reason? The *Heavenly Doctrine* tells us that the thoughts we entertain of the spiritual world have an underlying effect that most of us do not perceive. It is useful to remember that we are constantly in the company of two good and two evil spirits as well as whole societies of people in heaven and hell. Although all of these people are also unaware of their association with us, we connect with them by our thoughts and also by our affections. If we choose to organize our mental world around true ideas of the spiritual world, we are forging strong internal bonds, which do many good things for us and for our spiritual companions. Now the Lord will not allow our spiritual cohorts to compromise our freedom, but we can bring ourselves into the company of good spirits who by virtue of their good disposition help lead us away from evil deliberations and toward more positive and loving ideas.

Wonderful to say, we can have an uplifting effect on our spiritual associates as well. As they are making their way through the world of spirits—as we will one day—to their permanent homes in heaven or hell, they use their unconscious

attachment to us to work through their own stages of admission to their eternal homes. Of course, all of these spiritual connections can work against us if we choose to adopt a frame of mind that welcomes evil and falsity.

On a more natural, conscious level, if we set our minds toward accepting truths about the other world, it is very likely that we will be open to a variety of spiritual truths that we might otherwise ignore. For example, can you picture an image of a husband and wife as one angel doing important uses in heaven together? If you can, and if you believe this picture is a true one, then your grasp of all the marvelous truths about marriage in the work *Conjugal Love* will come much easier. And yes, even your willingness to work on your marriage will be affected. This same process will work with the use of other spiritual imagery as well. Picture meeting family and friends upon awakening. Picture spending each morning working at something you love to do that is of service to others. And then picture enjoying the afternoon with a good book or perhaps a round of golf. In the *Heavenly Doctrine* we have many first-hand accounts of encounters Swedenborg had with the occupants of the spiritual world. Along with descriptions of their environment, these accounts unveil a rich portrait of life after death just so that we can develop a confident, accurate vision of the world that awaits us all.

In a society that so often promotes purely sensory pleasure, it is especially important to project our minds to a vision of higher goals, to aim for the stars spiritually speaking. The Lord promises increasing enlightenment and an internal heavenly happiness for those who pursue spiritual excellence.

So to sum up just a few of the reasons or benefits for being watchful about our spiritual lot they are:

1. We acquire internal bonds with good spirits and angels that help restrain us from evil and even help us experience heavenly states in this world

2. We provide a supportive connection to those who have gone before us as they are busy finding their eternal homes
3. We create an open mind which can then receive myriads of other spiritual truths
4. Lastly, we stand to increase our enlightenment about our internal spiritual character, which can eventually lead us to experience astonishing states of genuine, spiritual happiness.

Now if we are to realize these benefits of being watchful it is important that we not only become informed about the afterlife and the spiritual world but be active or what the *Heavenly Doctrine* calls “constantly mindful of the Lord.”

[A]nyone who receives and possesses faith is constantly mindful of the Lord. This so even when he is thinking or talking about something other than Him, or else while he is carrying out his public, private, or family duties, though he is not directly conscious of his mindfulness of the Lord while he is carrying them out. (*Arcana Coelestia* 5130)

What a relief it is to know we need not become preoccupied with concern about our spiritual destination! Once our faith in spiritual truth matures, it affects everything we do. That is what it means to be “constantly mindful of the Lord.” To reach this wonderful stage of what is sometimes called “living in the Lord” (ibid), here are some things we can do.

For those in earlier stages of spiritual life this is the time to develop a conviction that the other world exists and a knowledge of its basic properties. To gain confidence we can become informed by reading works such as *Heaven and Hell* and taking time to browse a concordance or search program for the many exciting stories about Swedenborg’s explorations of the spiritual world. With an affirmative mindset, one can discover literally thousands of truths about the nature of life after death and the spiritual laws that govern it. One such law is that “thought brings presence and love brings conjunction” (see *Apocalypse Explained* 1099:2). This law explains that our thoughts in effect transport

us from place to place in the other world. When we discover that love brings conjunction, we get to the heart of all spiritual relationships. We begin to see how people come to live forever in societies with others of like mind and heart. This law also explains why people even in this world with common ideas and common loves develop an affinity for one another and gravitate to each other's company.

We live in an age of deep skepticism, especially about things that cannot be seen, felt, or heard with our physical senses. In early stages of spiritual growth, one can easily fall prey to this skepticism. This is one reason the church supports many forms of New Church education for all ages. These are intended to provide the tool doctrines and an environment free of negative skepticism. Freedom always entails the option of doubt and questioning yet it also requires a climate of openness to spiritual freedom of thought where faith in things physically unseen and unheard is not ridiculed or summarily discounted.

As our understanding and confidence in the spiritual world deepen, our ability to sense some of our inner life grows. The awareness starts to dawn on us that though our spiritual eyesight and sensation are relatively dull and obscure now, the plane of our thoughts and affections, where our actual spirit resides, is actively present with us all the time. Spiritual disciplines of quiet reading, prayer, and worship will help us to glimpse the inner life of our spirit, and we can gain perception of the inner world of our intentions and loves. Awareness of our own internal state is as a key to turning away from those evil loves or lusts that create such misery in our lives. This awareness is the "inner light" or enlightenment the Lord would like all of us to develop so that His heavenly kingdom may become the final resting-place for our spiritual minds and bodies.

To be wakeful or alert to our spiritual destiny is then to be "constantly mindful" rather than constantly aware. There are so many things we can do to stay wakeful and ready for our

upcoming residence in the spiritual world. The most important of these is to develop from the Lord a heavenly conscience. This can only happen if we take into our minds genuine knowledge about spiritual things to serve as a spiritual form of intelligence, allowing us to discern what is good and true. If we cultivate a heavenly conscience and require ourselves to obey it, we will be steadily preparing for a home among the angels and with our Lord without even being conscious of it.

It is a well known truth that apart from the Lord, we have no power to do battle against those spiritual forces that cause us to harbor anger, hatred, or other destructive thoughts and feelings. But by turning to the Lord's Word for enlightenment and asking for His aid, we can observe what needs to be changed. By using His gift of free will we can take action that invites His presence and His angelic forces to work on our behalf.

Our Lord is a merciful God. He does not exact punishment or revenge for our earthly misdeeds by condemning us to hell. Nor does He guarantee a slot in heaven for those who would be eternally frustrated by the loving environment there. Here, in beautiful simplicity, is what the Lord says to all of us who are concerned about our eternal home. To each one the answer is,

“‘Seek out what is good and what is true; then think the truth and do the good, if you are able.’ So in the spiritual world as in the natural world all are left to act from freedom according to reason; but as they have acted in this world so do they act in the spiritual world”. (*Divine Providence* 179:2)

Amen

Lessons: Genesis 15:12-15; Psalms 6, Matthew 24:42-44;
Arcana Coelestia 1854