

The Life Which Lasts Forever

A sermon by Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

Sometimes our thoughts about the spiritual world are closer than at other times. The reality of that world comes home to us when someone we know enters into it—into the life which lasts forever.

It is a comfort to know about the next life: that death is not the end, but a new beginning; that Lord brings each person to life again in His eternal kingdom, the spiritual world; that He awakens the body of the spirit so that we can continue life there. It really is a continuation of life: we continue to be the same people; we meet up with people we know; and, what is particularly touching, husbands and wives who had been separated by death are reunited. This is a beautiful picture, and it can provide tremendous reassurance.

In fact, the whole purpose of our life here on earth is to prepare for the other world—for the life which lasts forever. The Lord has lots to say about this preparation. In the Gospel of Matthew, He said the following familiar words:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (6:19-21).

We can see here the call to rise above our worldly concerns and to recognize the reality of eternal life. There is a teaching which takes these words one step further by saying, “What more ought anyone to have at heart than his life which lasts forever?” (*Arcana Coelestia* 794). It goes on to say, “Nothing is of greater importance to a person than knowing what is true.” We need to know the truth about the spiritual world, about the life which leads there, and about our responsibility to prepare ourselves for it.

Keeping the Spiritual World in Mind

Life is so short. My grandfather said to me once, from his advanced perspective, “You’ll wake up in a few days and realize that twenty-five years have passed.” There is amazing truth in these words. The Lord taught much the same thing in the Psalms, “As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.” (Psalm 103:15-16) Life here on earth, no matter how important it is, is like grass or a flower of the field. The wind passes over it, and it is gone. Sooner or later it will be our turn to cross over to that world we know exists and experience it for ourselves.

How often do we reflect about or picture ourselves dying and entering into the spiritual world? It’s one thing to know about heaven and hell objectively, but it’s quite another to picture ourselves there. People don’t generally like to think of their own mortality. After all, most of us have pressing concerns which occupy our minds—good concerns. Some of us have families we could not imagine being separated from. Many of us have jobs which absorb our energy and

make us feel useful at the same time. We often think about things we would like to do in the future, such as trips we would like to take when we're retired or when our children are grown.

But even these concerns are temporary, or at best transitional, when considered next to eternal life. And so the Lord asks us to prepare for that life as we go about our present concerns. He asks us to do this in the following words: "But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them" (Psalm 103:17-18).

Eternal life is far more substantial than earthly life is. It is far more important to prepare for that life, by fearing or honoring the Lord, by keeping His covenant, and by obeying His commandments. When we keep these principles and the reality of the spiritual world in mind, then we are much more likely to prepare for our eternal life, instead of ignoring it.

The Benefits of Thinking about Eternal Life

Teachings like these are not just warnings or reminders. They describe a whole way of thinking and an attitude about spiritual life which is very healthy. Keeping the reality of the spiritual world alive in our minds is a tremendous asset. I would like to mention three areas in which we can see the benefits.

1. It reminds us to value the good things in our lives. One way to see this is in our relationships. With an idea of eternal life, we know that some of our relationships will continue after death. Certainly if we know someone who has died, we can anticipate the time when we will meet him or her again, and pick up where we left off with joy.

In another way, we can value our current relationships more. The easiest way to see this is in the context of marriage. Most of us enter into marriage hoping that it will last forever—and it will if we work at it. If we hold onto that perspective of eternity, then we may value our spouse more and not take him or her for granted. The importance of eternity in relation to marriage is emphasized in the Word. For angels, if the idea of eternity is taken away, they feel flat and deeply depressed. The feeling that a relationship will not stop getting better, that it will never end, is essential. Otherwise why work at it? (see *Conjugal Love* 216a)

Another gift we can value is children. The Lord gives parents the privilege of preparing their children, of equipping them with tools which will help them prepare themselves for heaven. The end of His creation is a heaven from the human race (see *Divine Providence* 27). It is a wonderful thing to realize that He allows us to participate in His system. It can inspire us to recognize our responsibility to do all we can for our children to help them on their way—not just for life in this world, but for life in heaven to eternity.

Other things we may be reminded to value are the church and the Word, which the church has been given. The Word teaches us about the life that leads to heaven, and the church supports us in living that life. With a keen sense of our own mortality, we may feel called by the Lord to pay greater attention to these treasures which He has given us.

2. The second benefit of keeping the reality of spiritual world in mind is that it gives us perspective when bad things happen. In the work, *Divine Providence*, the Lord teaches us a principle of His government: “The Divine Providence regards eternal things, and not temporal things except so far as they accord with eternal things” (heading to nos. 214-220). The thrust of this chapter is to show that the Lord is constantly working for our eternal happiness. He does not ignore our present concerns, but, if there is a choice, He will always choose our eternal happiness over our present happiness.

For example, there are plenty of car accidents involving drunk drivers. In most cases innocent people get hurt through no fault of their own. Does that mean the Lord doesn't care about these people? Of course not. But His eternal end is that all people may be free to go to heaven. He has to permit people to be selfish and cruel, and even allow them to cause others to suffer, if they are going to have the freedom to do the opposite: to turn to Him, to respond to His call, and to return the love He offers from freedom.

Knowing this principle of the Lord's government—that He looks out for our eternal welfare over our short term happiness—helps to give us perspective. When bad things happen to us or to anyone else we can see that the Lord still cares. Our job, from day one of our lives to the end, is to cooperate with the Lord—to let Him prepare us for heaven. His system is set up for that goal—always emphasizing the eternal over the temporary.

3. It helps us when evil delights tempt us. The last benefit I want to mention comes in the form of a negative. It may be easier to see the benefit of having an eternal perspective by seeing what it's like *not* to have one. When people fail to think about or care about eternal life they are actually “laying up for themselves treasures on earth.” Such a person is carried away by hell. They are led to think about themselves and occupy their minds with what will make them happy *now*, in this world.

We know that all people are born with evil hereditary tendencies. What this means is that all people feel pleasure sometimes when they shouldn't—an insane hellish pleasure, but pleasure nonetheless. The hells can use these delights to be tremendously persuasive. They use our pleasures to lure us.

Sometimes the hells don't have to try very hard, because the delights arising from putting ourselves first are so powerful. There is a teaching in *Heaven and Hell* which says that hellish pleasures are felt more forcefully than heavenly ones in this world (401). If we think about it, that's true. It feels good to drink too much. It gives us a feeling of power to make ourselves look good at the expense of someone else. There is satisfaction in having the biggest house and the best clothes to wear. Our senses are so alive, and the worldly pleasures which arise from them are strong.

But heavenly delights are much less forceful in this world. They are there, but internal. *Heaven and Hell* calls them “a blessedness that is hardly perceptible, because it is hidden away in the interiors” (401). Of course it feels nice to do good things. There is satisfaction in doing our jobs well. The trouble is, it often feels like hard work while we are doing it. The

rewards are secondary, and we have to pay attention to see them. They're there, but less forceful in this world.

Fortunately, things change in the next life. Selfishness is rewarded not with pleasure but with punishment or frustration, while charity brings delight itself. But while we are in this world, we need to be aware. The hells are much less persuasive when we are paying attention. When we get caught up in acquiring stuff in the world and in being well off, it is important to remember the Lord's words:

I say to you, do not worry about your life: what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?...But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (Matthew 6:25, 33)

The truth is, heavenly happiness is the only real happiness. "A person who is led by the Lord is in freedom itself, and thus in delight and bliss itself" (*Arcana Coelestia* 6325). Other states which the Lord promises are states of peace, blessedness and happiness—all of which improve to eternity. Reminding ourselves of the reality of the spiritual world can help us forego some of the transitory pleasures offered to us by hell.

So we return to the teachings we began with. "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven," the Lord says (Matthew 6:20). In other words, He asks that we keep the spiritual world in mind as we go about our lives, for then our hearts will be there also. He also asks us to remember that our days are numbered: "As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more" (Psalm 103:15-16).

Finally, He asks that we remember our spiritual responsibility to prepare for His kingdom and obey its laws, for we "ought to know what the laws of the kingdom are, so that we can live happily to eternity" (*Spiritual Experiences* 2331). If we cooperate, then we can be assured of happiness, for "the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them" (Psalm 103:17-18).

So "what more ought anyone to have at heart than his life which lasts forever?" (*Arcana Coelestia* 794). "Wherefore let him who wishes to be eternally happy know and believe that he will live after death. Let him think of this and keep it in mind, for it is the truth" (*Arcana Coelestia* 8939:3).

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 103: 1-19; Matthew 6:19-34; *Arcana Coelestia* 794