

Angels and Spirits with Us



Bird's Eye View of Lesson

The Lord gives us two angels and two evil spirits to accompany us as we choose between acting from heaven and love to the Lord or acting from hell and love of self. In this way the Lord ensures that we are truly free to walk the path to heaven or choose the pathway to hell. The angels and spirits with us change throughout our lives, as we grow from infancy to adulthood and as we make good and bad choices in our lives. After we die we will live with the kind of spiritual companions we have chosen during our life on earth.

Readings from the Word

The Word tells numerous stories in which people see and talk to spirits. They bring messages, warnings and comfort. Who are these messengers? Can we experience them with us today?

A Distressing Spirit Banished by Music

Saul, Israel's first king, was often troubled by a distressing spirit. His servants suggested that getting someone to play on the harp might help him.

And so it was, whenever the spirit from God was upon Saul, that David would take a harp and play it with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed and well, and the distressing spirit would depart from him (1 Samuel 16:14-16, 23)

It appeared to Saul and his servants that the distressing spirit came from the Lord, but nothing could be further from the truth. Another story about Elisha and his servant illustrates the way the Lord sends angels to guide and protect us.

Angels Ready to Help

When the king of Syria discovered that Elisha was warning the king of Israel about where the Syrian army would attack, he decided to go after Elisha. The troops arrived and surrounded Elisha's house. When the sight of the troops terrified his servant, Elisha reassured him with these words:

"Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, and said, "Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:16-17).



Angels and Spirits with Us

Near the end of Jesus' life He was in the Garden of Gethsemane when a mob came to take Him away. He rebuked the disciples who tried to help Him, saying:

“[D]o you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?”(Matthew 26:53)

The Lord knew that He alone had to conquer the hells in the final temptation of the cross. His words however reassured His disciples and can reassure us that angels are always ready to protect and defend us.

Angels and Spirits Are Constantly with People

While the scriptures give us some clues, the Heavenly Doctrine teaches an abundance of truths about angels and spirits. We are taught that people living in the world are constantly protected by angels. At the same time evil spirits are also present exercising their influence. The presence of these good and evil spirits links people with societies in both heaven and hell, allowing people to choose freely between these good and evil influences in their lives.

At least two evil spirits and two angels are present with every person. Through the evil spirits a person is in communication with hell, and through the angels with heaven. Without the communication with heaven and hell a person could not go on living for even a moment (see *Arcana Coelestia* 697, 5849).

A person is linked to them in such a way that he cannot think anything, or will it, unless he does so together with them, so that interiorly he is in communication with the spiritual world (*Arcana Coelestia* 5861).

How Angels Protect Us

The Heavenly Doctrine gives us a vivid idea of how guardian angels protect people from the ceaseless attacks of hell.

The angels impart charity and faith, notice the direction in which the person's delights turn, and modify and bend those delights towards what is good.... They are forbidden to act in any violent manner and thereby crush a person's evil desires and false assumptions. They must act gently. Their function is also to control evil spirits who come from hell. When evil spirits infuse evils and falsities the angels instill truths and goods, which—even if they are not accepted—serve to temper what the former infuse. Spirits from hell are constantly on the attack, and angels provide protection.

The angels moderate affections, since they constitute a person's life and also his freedom. They also notice any influence on a person from hells which are now open but were not previously so, which happens when a person goes off into some new evil. To the extent that the person allows, the angels close those hells. They also remove any spirits who may be trying to come out from there.

Angels and Spirits with Us



The angels call forth the forms of good and truth with a person and set them opposite the evils and falsities activated by the evil spirits. As a result the person is in the middle and is not conscious of the evil or of the good. And being in the middle he is in freedom to turn towards one or towards the other. Angels from the Lord lead and protect a person every instant and fraction of an instant (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5992).

Spiritual Companions Change as People Change

The particular spirits and angels that are with people during their lives change as they grow spiritually. As our loves change, so do our spiritual companions.

The spirits with a person change according to how the person's states undergo change—the states of his affection that is of his love and the ends he has in view. The spirits present at one time are removed and others take their place. In general what kinds of spirits are present with a person is determined by the character of the person himself (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5851).

Over time, a person's character is formed by the spiritual influences he or she repeatedly invites from the spiritual world.

People and Spirits Are Not Aware of Each Other's Presence

Angels are continually protecting and gently leading us without our being aware of what they are doing. Our guardian angels are concerned with our spirit and its condition, but do not know our worldly name and circumstances.

Angels and spirits do not know what people they are with. Neither do people know the angels and spirits they are with. For the Lord alone knows and disposes this (see *Last Judgment* 9).

If people became aware of their spiritual companions, they would lose their feeling that their life is their own (see *Divine Providence* 176). The Lord constantly guards this freedom because without it we would be more like an animal than human.

People Stay with the Same Spirits After They Die

Through a life of making spiritual choices people forge ties to specific communities of angels or devils by continually seeking their presence and influence. After people die they are prepared for life in heaven or hell. They will then move to their eternal home where they will live with the same spiritual associates they chose while living in the world.

(A person) finally returns to the same community, because that community had acted in unison with the love in him which has gained control (*Arcana Coelestia* 5861).



Focus Points

1. Compare Saul's experience in 1 Samuel 16 with a time when you felt troubled about something.
2. Saul changed his spiritual associates by calling David to play his harp. How might you change your spiritual associates when faced with a troubled state of mind?
3. Elisha experienced the strong protection of angels when surrounded by powerful threatening forces. Can you think of other stories in the Word where one or more angels helped someone?
4. Share an experience that you have had (or one that you have heard about) in which a powerful force of good protected you in a frightening or threatening situation.
5. What kind of spirits are with every person? Is it possible to feel their presence?
6. Why might spirits that are associated with a person change? Can a person be aware of this happening?
7. After death, we will live with spirits who share our same loves. How is this different from our spiritual associations when we are living in this world? Why has this change happened?

Activity 1

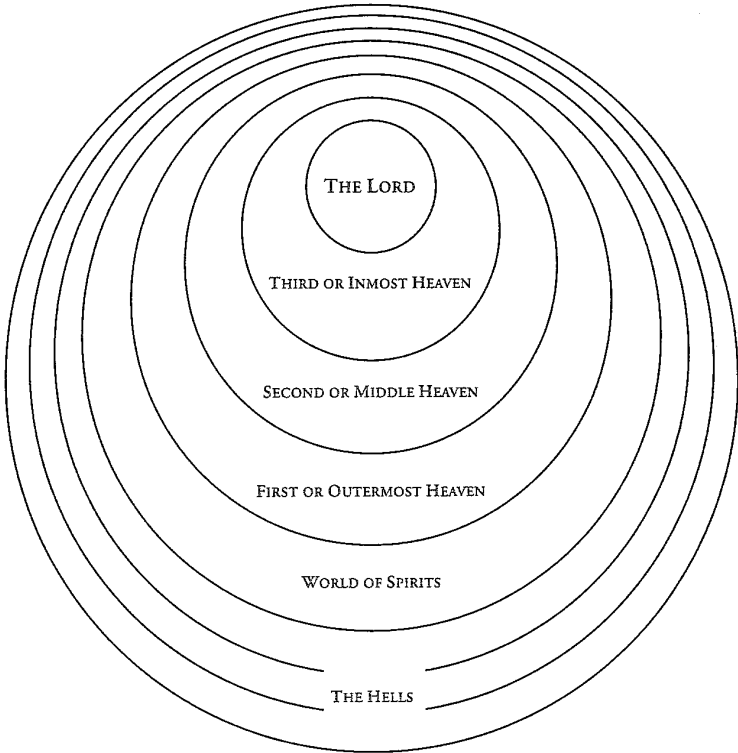
Mapping the Spiritual World

The Heavenly Doctrine gives a full picture of heaven, hell and the world of spirits. People have used these descriptions to come up with various ways of mapping the spiritual world. Use the information you have learned about the spiritual world to come up with a diagram that pictures how you think heaven, hell, the world of spirits, and the natural world fit together. Where do you picture the Lord? When you have finished, turn the page.

Mapping the Spiritual World, continued

Compare your map to the following diagrams. Look for similarities and differences. Do these diagrams change your mental picture of the spiritual world? Which map gives you the clearest idea of the spiritual world?

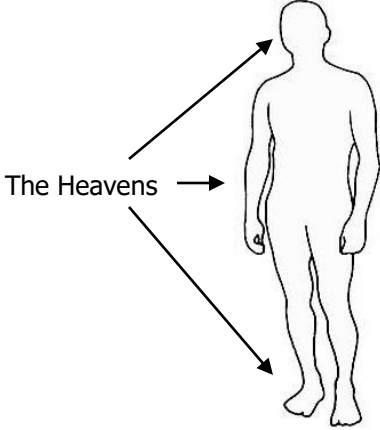
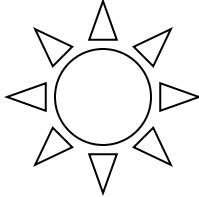
Diagram A



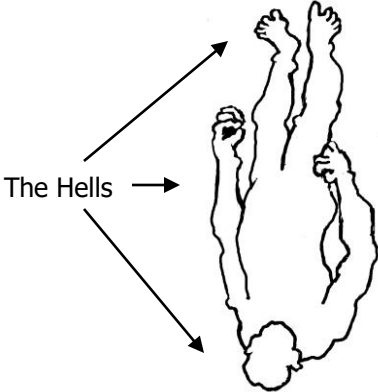
Adapted from the New Century Edition *Heaven and Hell* (West Chester, Pa.: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000), page 13. Used with permission.

Diagram B

The Lord as the Spiritual Sun



The World of Spirits



Activity 2

Contacting Spirits



The Word gives examples of people who talk to spirits and angels *e.g.* Saul goes to a medium so he can talk to the prophet Samuel who has died (1 Samuel 28). Also angels appear to various people including Mary, Joseph, and Zachariah.

The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that in ancient times heaven was open to people and that people received revelation from the Lord in that way. Today revelation is given by means of the written Word, and heaven is no longer open to people in the same way (see *Arcana Coelestia* 784). For people today, contacting spirits is dangerous.

Many believe that a person can be taught by the Lord by means of spirits speaking with him. But those who believe this and are willing to believe it do not know that it is dangerous to their souls.... As soon as spirits begin to speak with a person they come out of their spiritual state into a person's natural state, and they then know that they are with a person and they join themselves with the thoughts of his affection and speak with him from those thoughts. They can enter into no other state of a person, for all conjunction is by like affection and thought. For this reason the speaking spirit must be in the same principles as the person is, whether they are true or false. These he stirs up, and through his affection conjoined to a person's affection, he strongly confirms them. All this shows the danger in which a person is who speaks with spirits or who manifestly perceives their operation. A person does not know what the quality of his affection is, whether it is good or evil, or with what other spirits it is joined.... Whenever a spirit from like affection favors a person's thoughts or principles, one leads the other as the blind lead the blind until both fall into the pit (*Apocalypse Explained* 1182:4-5).

Discussion or Reflection

1. Is it appropriate or orderly for people to contact spirits today? (For example, by going to a psychic, fortune teller or using a Ouija board.)
2. Why is it dangerous?
3. What kinds of spirits are interested in having contact with people?
4. Can a person tell whether they are communicating with good or evil spirits, or a particular person they want to talk to? Why or why not?
5. How would communicating directly with spirits change a person's freedom?



Visions and Dreams

Activity 3

Although intentional contact with angels or spirits in the spiritual world is dangerous, people sometimes have dreams or visions of angels, or of friends or relatives who have died. These experiences feel like a wonderful gift to those who receive them. Here is one woman's story of how a friend's vision helped her at a difficult time in her life.

Tears Make Rainbows

There was a time when I had been going through quite a bit of internal struggle, feeling lost, sad, and despairing. I hadn't spoken of my heartache to anyone as I did not see a use. One morning a friend called me on the phone to tell me of a dream she had just had about me. I was both amazed and comforted by my friend's dream. It was an assurance of the Lord's tender care in our times of struggle.

My friend told me: You were standing in a clear light, and you were weeping. As they fell your tears turned to crystal, breaking into more crystals and rainbow light. A red bird in flight was circling round your head. Then I saw that it wasn't a bird, for it had the face of an angel, and I perceived that it was an angel.

The angel turned to me and asked, "Doesn't Kathy see me?" But you didn't see the angel, and you didn't know that I was there either.

The angel spoke again. "Doesn't she know that I am here and that everything will be all right?"

Kathy

Taken from *A Dove at the Window*, compiled and edited by Vera P. Glenn © 1999, p. 161. Used by Permission

Ideas for Discussion

1. Why does the Lord allow people to have dreams or visions like this?
2. How might these experiences help someone who is grieving for a loved one or experiencing a difficult time in his or her life?
3. Discuss experiences like this that you have heard about.

For Reflection

As you read or hear about such dreams and visions, you may notice that the Lord doesn't let these experiences take away our freedom by telling us something we don't already know about the life after death or about our lives. He is always protecting our spiritual freedom.

Activity 4

Finding Inner Peace



Peace has in it trust in the Lord, that He governs all things,
provides all things, and leads to a good end.
(*Arcana Coelestia* 8455)

Saul struggled with a distressing spirit (1 Samuel 16). Evil spirits plagued him with terrifying thoughts. Think about a time when you have been troubled by distressing thoughts. Write down examples of troubling thoughts and ideas that evil spirits might bring into a person's mind.

To soothe Saul, his servants went to find a person who could play the harp. Harps picture the spiritual affection for what is true (*Apocalypse Explained* 323). What true ideas can help us gain perspective when we or our friends have troubling thoughts?

Make a plan of action for the next time you (or one of your friends) are troubled by distressing thoughts.



Notice the Angels

From the Top of the Yardstick by Donnette Alfelt © 2006 used by permission.

Angels are sent to watch over us, to lead us away from evil and to inspire us with good (Emanuel Swedenborg).

Angels were with you when you were born. They will be close by when you die, and every moment in between.

You arrived in this world surrounded by heavenly angels that deeply touched those who welcomed and loved you. Though they never leave us, for most of our lives, angels with us are not very conspicuous. They do not force themselves on us or want recognition. They are messengers from the Lord Himself who feel joy when they can touch and serve us. Life is better when we take time to notice and thank them.

Notice the Angels

- ...who surround babies.
- ...who touch you through the wonders and beauty of nature.
- ...who help you see the good qualities in others.
- ...who move you to compassion.
- ...who inspire you with good ideas.
- ...who touch you through inspiring music.
- ...who give you the strength to keep going.
- ...who inspire kindness.
- ...who work through your conscience.
- ...who are with you during crises.
- ...who give you hope and never give up on you.
- ...who bring you joy when you use your God given talents.
- ...who suggest loving things you might do for others.
- ...who have a part in daily coincidences.
- ...who grieve with you in times of sorrow.
- ...who give you a taste of heavenly joy when you are unselfishly useful.
- ...who are in genuine loving smiles.
- ...who give you the courage to admit when you are wrong.
- ...who are there to lift you up.
- ...who long to lead you, but let you choose whether to follow.
- ...who whisper while other shout.
- ...who lead you to God.

Further Reading

Guardian Angels

A sermon by the Rev. Kurt Horigan Asplundh

“Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!” (Luke 15:6).

While on earth, the Lord was censured by the Pharisees and scribes for associating with tax collectors and known sinners, even eating with them. How could a holy man defile himself like that? Didn't He know what kind of people these were? The Pharisees and scribes criticized the Lord for mingling with sinners and the despised publicans.

The Lord used this occasion to teach three parables about celebrating the finding of something that had been lost: a lost sheep, a silver coin, and a wayward son. Our text is from the first of these parables. The shepherd returns from his search rejoicing, with his lost sheep safely on his shoulders. He calls together friends and neighbors. “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!” There was rejoicing and celebration. Even the hard-hearted scribes and Pharisees understood the joy in finding a lost sheep.

Then the Lord drew an unexpected parallel: “Likewise,” He said, “there will be more joy over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). Did these Pharisees and scribes understand? The Lord had not come to condemn sinners but to save them. Did the parables help them see why He mingled with and taught people of every reputation? His lesson for the Pharisees and scribes was that the angelically-minded find joy when sinners repent and come into heaven. They didn't have any sympathy for sinners or any desire to see them saved. But the life of charity consists in thinking kindly of others, we are told, in wishing them well and “in perceiving joy in oneself from the fact that others also are saved” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2284:5).

This parable of the shepherd, like all the Lord's parables, inwardly teaches about the Lord Himself. The Lord is the Good Shepherd. He has come to search out and find the lost sheep of humanity; He has come to call sinners to repentance. And there is rejoicing in heaven for every soul carried home by the Lord.

The Lord shares His love of saving people with angels. He sends them out as spiritual shepherds of His flock to bring light, protection and comfort to each person willing to receive them. We call these our guardian angels. They serve as the Lord's ministers in this work, and they perceive nothing “more delightful and happy,” we are told, “than to remove evils from a person, and lead him to heaven” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6482, 5992:3). They do these things “from the love they have from the Lord” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5992:3).

Over the centuries, religions have taught the idea of guardian angels. They are often mentioned in the Scriptures. For example, in Daniel, we read of the angel who protected Daniel in the den of lions. After the birth of the Lord, an angel appeared to Joseph, warning him to flee into Egypt with Mary and the infant Lord. In these and many other examples, we see the Lord using angels to guard, protect and care for people on earth.

“For He shall give His angels charge over you to keep you in all your ways” (Psalm 91:11).

Popular culture has depicted guardian angels as supernatural beings capable of foresight and miraculous powers, sometimes stepping in to prevent a tragedy or righting a great wrong. Though we live in an age of skepticism concerning spiritual beings, there remains a lingering hope that God can keep us safe by sending angels to watch over us. We remember the promise of another Psalm: “The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them” (Psalm 34:7). In the New Church, though, we are taught that the primary concern of the angels is for our spiritual, not our natural, welfare.

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church teaches how the Lord employs angels for our care. “In general angels from each society are sent to people to watch over them...” (*Heaven and Hell* 391:2). They “ward off evils and falsities” by perceiving where our thoughts and minds are turning “a thousand times better” than we do (*Arcana Coelestia* 227, 228) and quietly bending them to something better.

It may come as a surprise to learn that these guardian angels are countered by evil spirits who also are associated with us. “At least two evil spirits and two angels are present with every person” (*Arcana Coelestia* 697). We are influenced by hell through our link with evil spirits and by heaven through the angels. There is contention for our soul.

Most of our life, we are blissfully unaware of the constant struggle going on in our mind—the angels fighting on one side, the spirits of hell on the other. What loves are at work? The Heavenly Doctrine shows the contrast: angels find delight in doing good to people and promoting their eternal welfare; evil spirits, on the other hand, find their delight in doing evil to people, and contributing to their eternal ruin. Such is the opposition (*Arcana Coelestia* 5864). These are the stakes. Angels rejoice in our salvation; evil spirits in our eternal ruin. With which camp will we throw in our lot?

Hagar, Sarai’s maidservant, was caught between her own pride and obedience to her mistress. When she conceived Abram’s child, her mistress who was still barren was despised in her eyes. When Sarai dealt harshly with her, Hagar fled the household, goaded by a spirit of contempt and rebellion. She had thrown in her lot with spirits who would bring her and her unborn son to eternal ruin. Then, in the wilderness, the angel of the Lord came to her. The voice of angelic reason spoke: “Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going?” (Genesis 16:8).

Hagar turned away from her pride to listen to the wisdom of this angel of the Lord. “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand” (Genesis 16:9). The angel added, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude” (Genesis 16:10). Freely, Hagar chose the better way.

The angels assigned to us work secretly and gently. Although one angel has the power to drive off thousands of evil spirits, the Lord does not allow angels to use this “almighty

force.” Every person must be led in freedom, gently and gradually, to a state of heavenly order (*Arcana Coelestia* 5854:2). We commonly think of guardian angels exercising supernatural powers to bring about the Lord’s will. We picture them interrupting evil plots and even standing in our way to stop spiritually harmful acts. While that sometimes is so, when the Lord permits it, these angels most often act in harmony with our freedom. They moderate and bend our thoughts. They are forbidden to curb our cupidities and evil principles with violence but are enjoined to “act gently” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5992).

After Elijah the prophet had single-handedly defeated four hundred and fifty false prophets of Baal in a test by fire, his troubles were not ended. Jezebel, the queen, threatened to kill him. Elijah ran for his life, stopping a day’s journey into the wilderness under a juniper tree. Deeply discouraged, he felt he had failed to cleanse Israel of the abominable worship of Baal. Here, he prayed in a voice of despair: “It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!” (I Kings 19:4). He slept until, suddenly, an angel woke him and gave him food and drink. Having eaten, he slept again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time. He encouraged Elijah, urging him to eat and drink again in preparation for a long journey. He assured him he was not alone in his faith in the Lord and that soon he would pass on his mantle to another great prophet. So Elijah journeyed to Horeb, the mountain of God, at the quiet insistence of the angel.

When we are attacked by infernal spirits, the angels defend us. They call forth the goods and truths of remains that we have and “set them in opposition to the evils and falsities which the evil spirits excite” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5992:2). That is the order. As evil spirits attack, the angels protect. They bring about an equilibrium so people in the middle of these forces are free to turn toward heaven or hell. The Lord sees to it that while spirits flow into our thoughts and desires, the angels flow into the ends we have in view, strengthening us from within. “This inflowing takes place silently “without the person knowing it,” we are told, “but even though it is hidden it works effectively” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5854).

Angels with us respect our freedom though the spirits of hell do not. If we choose evil the angels quietly recede. Yet, we are told, they “never depart completely from a person.” We cannot live without this link to heaven (*Arcana Coelestia* 5979, 5854). And, like good shepherds, our guardian angels continue to hope for our return.

We can see an instance of this respect for human freedom in the account of Balaam and his donkey. When Balaam, a seer from the East, was riding to Moab intending to curse the tribes of Israel in exchange for great rewards, his donkey stopped suddenly. The donkey saw an angel of the Lord standing in the roadway with his sword drawn. To go forward would mean death. When the donkey simply refused to go forward and Balaam began beating her with his staff, she spoke out in living voice. Then the Lord opened Balaam’s eyes to see what his beast had seen. He knew he would have been killed if he had gone forward. He offered to turn back, though in his heart he still longed for the rewards promised to him. The angel compromised with him: “Go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak” (Numbers 22:35). In freedom, Balaam’s curse against Israel was turned into a blessing and a prophecy of the Lord’s birth.

The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that we have our part in welcoming angels into our life. We must prepare a resting place in our minds where angelic influx can be received. This comes from reading the Word with a sincere desire to learn what the Lord teaches. It is established by reflecting on how spiritual principles can be incorporated into our life. In this way we provide what the doctrine calls a “plane of influx.” “But this plane cannot be acquired,” we are told, “unless the truths of faith have been put into act” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5893:3). In other words, we must live our religion. Such efforts form a conscience of what is right and wrong. This is where the angels can be present to strengthen us against the influences of hell. In addition, it is important that we acknowledge the Lord and recognize that He alone has all power over evil (*Heaven and Hell* 577). These things together provide the foundation for our spiritual life.

We see this principal illustrated in the account of Daniel, who was taken captive to Babylon but rose to power in that kingdom. While in exile, he continued to worship the God of Israel, praying toward Jerusalem three times each day, even when the king had signed a decree forbidding it. Daniel continued to live according to what he believed to be right. As a result, he was thrown into a den of lions and confined there through the night. When the king came in the morning, crying out to Daniel, and asking, “has your God been able to deliver you from the lions?” Daniel replied, “My God sent His angel and shut the lions’ mouths, so that they have not hurt me...” (Daniel 6:20,22).

By the lions are signified fierce passions of anger. The fact that Daniel was made safe by an angel that night shows that the influences of self-love from the hells were muzzled. Because Daniel worshipped the Lord and continued to obey His laws even in captivity, angels had a basis to protect him from the destructive power of the hells. His body was unhurt by the lions that crouched before him, just as his soul was untouched by any anger or fierceness of revenge springing from hell.

Our guardian angels protect our souls from spiritual attack, regarding the body and its well-being as nothing in comparison with the soul (*Arcana Coelestia* 2380e). Indeed, sometimes our natural life must be permitted to suffer for the sake of more important spiritual ends. This does not mean that we have been abandoned by the angels in times of misfortune and tragedy. Their love is unceasing and they continue to care for those to whom they are assigned with a tenderness and passion that models the Lord’s own love.

This love is so strong, we are told, that angels would think nothing of giving their own lives like brave soldiers in battle, if doing so could save a soul from hell. They would even go so far as to suffer hell itself—that is, they would be willing to exchange their place in heaven for the place of a soul in hell—for the sake of that soul—if such a thing were possible (*Arcana Coelestia* 2077:2).

How grateful we should be that the Lord sends angels with this kind of love to be with us! Their inmost joy is to lead souls to heaven. For I say to you, “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). Therefore, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!” Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 91:1-13; Luke 15:1-10; *Arcana Coelestia* 5992, parts