

## “The creation itself will be liberated” (Part One)

Reflection 35 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Now we come to the conclusion of our series on “Salvation: The Quest.” I hope it’s been good for you – the recognition that whoever you are and whatever you may have done you can always start over, begin again, be reborn, experience forgiveness, the forgiveness of God, and then looking more deeply discover within yourself the Spirit of God. And, yes, that is true. That is the promise of life. That is the promise of God.

But I hope that you’ve also come to a larger understanding of salvation: that it’s to be saved from danger, from harm, from disease, from oppression, from evil intent and violence; that it’s ours here and now, today, in this world, in this time; and that it has global implications. It’s part of saving the world which has always been God’s intent (John 3:17). It’s God’s vision for a new earth where God’s will is done just as it is in heaven.

And yet salvation also about heaven. So to this we turn again, and I begin by saying that with regard to heaven, the church in our time suffers from a crisis of imagination, and because of this – this failure of imagination – the church is only a pale shadow of what it could be. It’s lost its eternal vision, its forever-vision, its sense of how life in the end plays out, of how creation in the end plays out. It pictures heaven, for instance, hardly at all, or when it does, its pictures of heaven are dull and uninspiring, so that the average Christian thinks of heaven as an unending church service, as if we all sat on clouds and sang songs – and I don’t know what else – for ever and ever. I mean, singing songs is great, but there still can be too much of a good thing. I do note in passing that no one pictures Heaven as an unending sermon.

In any case, the church has lost its vibrancy and its color and its heroism because its view of the future has no real vibrancy and color and heroism. And corporate America keeps out-performing the church because it keeps out-imagining, not to mention out-spending, the church. And so when faith takes courage, demands risk, and calls for sacrifice and even heroism, there is nothing in our imagination that inspires us. And when we pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we haven’t the foggiest notion what that will might be, because we have hardly any notion of heaven. And we are greatly diminished as human beings, as Christians, and as churches. It need not be that way.

I think again of the passionate and stirring vision of C. S. Lewis in his *Chronicles of Narnia* which tell tales of the great lion figure Aslan and of his country, Aslan’s country, which is heaven.<sup>i</sup> At the end of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan seems to have brought that delightful kingdom of Narnia to an end, and the children are left to mourn its loss. If you’ve read those chronicles, you know how marvelous Narnia is. If you’ve not read them, just imagine the place on earth that makes you happiest. And then it comes to an end.

In any case, the children are left to mourn the loss of Narnia.

“So,” said Peter, “night falls on Narnia. What, Lucy! You’re not crying? With Aslan ahead, and all of us here?”

“Don’t try to stop me, Peter,” said Lucy, “I am sure Aslan would not. I am sure it is not wrong to mourn for Narnia. ...”

“Yes, and I did hope,” said Jill, “that it might go on forever. I knew our world couldn’t. I did think Narnia might.”

“Sirs,” said the unicorn Tirian. “The ladies do well to weep. See, I do so myself. What world but Narnia have I ever known? It were no virtue, but great discourtesy, if we did not mourn.”

But as the children venture farther into Aslan’s country, they begin to recognize every rock and stream and tree. They have been there before. And then they discover, to their wonder and joy, that Narnia exists forever in Aslan’s country, that the world they loved has been preserved, though more rich and more real than ever. It was the unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then cried: “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this.”

But seriously! Is there any basis for this? In fact there is in Paul’s words in Romans 8:18-25. In Romans 1-8 Paul is making really only one point, but it’s maybe the most important point anyone could ever make. He’s saying: Everything depends on faith from first to last (1:17). Salvation depends on faith from first to last. Righteousness depends on faith from first to last; doing the right thing depends on faith from first to last. The power for really living – the way one receives “righteousness from God” – is by trusting God, letting go of the fear and trusting God, and trusting the life to which he is calling us. Our trust, however, will be challenged again and again. We will suffer. But be sure of this, Paul says in our text, our present sufferings are nothing compared with the glory that will be revealed in us.

And then his thoughts turn to creation. Creation itself eagerly awaits that time when the children of God will be revealed. It will be glorious. Our bodies will be redeemed. Our bodies will no longer be burdened, polluted, corrupted by sin, no longer held back by fear, no longer tied up in knots by our own self-absorption. They will be transcendent, luminous, radiant, glorious. They will reflect the glory of God within us. And creation, now subjected to frustration, will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. Sin’s dominion will be broken. Death and decay will end. The ground will no longer be cursed as it was in the Fall (Gen. 3:17). Creation regains its original freedom.

But of course this doesn't square with the picture the church has usually painted of the Last Day. We think perhaps of Peter's ominous words about the destruction of the earth in 2 Peter 3:10-13, that: the heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, will melt in the heat, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.<sup>ii</sup> And it seems like the whole cosmos is going down in a ball of flames, until you notice that Peter had pointed to the flood in Noah's day as an allegory for "the day of the Lord," and says that the world was destroyed then (v.6). Now it wasn't actually destroyed. The earth remained. What was destroyed was human wickedness. The flood cleansed and renewed the earth, and Noah and his family stepped out onto a restored earth to begin anew. Likewise fire in Scripture is used not just for destruction but also for cleansing. Paul writes of our life's work being tested in the fire, like gold, but only the impurities are burned away (1 Corinthians 3:13-15). And perhaps this is the fire Peter envisions when he writes in words that are apocalyptic, that is, in words that describe spiritual realities in cosmic symbolism, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by the fire, and the earth and everything will be laid bare," not destroyed so much as revealed, scrubbed of all unrighteousness. Because if the words of Paul in Romans 8:18-25, mean anything, they do not denote the permanent annihilation of our universe, but its transformation, perhaps its cleansing, so that it will fulfill the purposes for which God created it.

– Dale Pauls

***Part Two (of two) next week***

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<sup>i</sup> Indebted to John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire*, 122-23.

<sup>ii</sup>Eldredge, 120-22.