

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

Reflection 36 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Despite traditional Christian notions of an earth annihilated and the odd text taken literally and used as proof-text of this, Paul in Romans 8:18-25 speaks of creation being transformed, liberated from its bondage to decay. Likewise, John in Revelation 21-22 sees the New Jerusalem not floating in the clouds, but descending from heaven to the earth. In the words of Dallas Willard, “The life we now have as the persons we now are will continue in the universe in which we now exist.” Our home in eternity will literally be a home, a place with which we are familiar. And this is important to the soul. When we place eternity “out there somewhere,” in a place we cannot imagine, there is nothing to look forward to. To lose the only world we have ever known – a world filled with memories, rich and beautiful, and with so much left to explore – is to lose something deep and priceless to our hearts. But what Paul is saying, and John is saying, is that we get the earth back. It will be creation brought back again, re-edited, restored.

Creation can be so breathtaking now. What will it be like when it is released to its full glory? What will it be like to see the world “with dew still on it”? Scripture of course tells of the world “with dew still on it,” back in the beginning, in Genesis 2, how the Lord God planted a garden in the east, in Eden, a paradise, a pleasure garden of trees. Usually the church rushes past the story of Eden to the account of the Fall in Genesis 3 as if that were the event of greater significance. Too often we act as if the human story began with the Fall, but this is like coming into a movie twenty minutes late. It leaves the viewer always a little disoriented, so much so that he or she may miss the director’s point entirely.

Don’t miss that before the Fall there was this pleasure garden: where man and woman work alongside God; where for all practical purposes everything is permitted, we move freely, not tempted by anything, not restrained by anything; where there is a tree of life the fruit of which (with constant eating) grants immortality; where there is inexhaustible water, a garden that waters the earth; where animals are fully welcomed into the sociable circle of life; where all are so comfortable within themselves that they are naked and unashamed; and where God walks with us in the cool of the day. And surely this pleasure garden intimates the home God has always intended for his children. So it is no surprise that John in his description of the new heaven and the new earth (in Revelation 21-22) inserts into the new Jerusalem the garden imagery of Eden: the tree, the river. And I note in passing that it’s not clear that the Fall, when judged by the whole of Scripture, is the main point of Genesis 1-3; it’s not even mentioned in the rest of the Old Testament. From the narrator’s perspective the more important truth is that our destiny was once to live in God’s world, with God’s other creatures, on God’s astonishingly generous terms. By the end of Scripture we see that this is still meant to be.

For hundreds of years the church understood this; the medieval cloister– that garden within a colonnade in a monastery – was designed to replicate both Eden and Heaven. It was a place of peace, rest, and repose, and it was meant as an intentional aid to

visualizing eternity or paradise. Heaven was imagined as a garden in perpetual springtime, with lilies and roses always in bloom, filled with birdsong.

The great works of art and music have always known this. Much of the power of the musical *The Lion King* derives from its use of the imagery of Eden, for instance the song “Circle of Life:”

From the day we arrive on the planet  
 And blinking, step into the sun  
 There's more to see than can ever be seen  
 More to do than can ever be done  
 There's far too much to take in here  
 More to find than can ever be found  
 But the sun rolling high  
 Through the sapphire sky  
 Keeps great and small on the endless round

It's the circle of life  
 And it moves us all  
 Through despair and hope  
 Through faith and love  
 Till we find our place  
 On the path unwinding  
 In the circle  
 The circle of life

But when you hear the music of *The Lion King*, you're hearing the music of Eden and of paradise, the music of the creation itself liberated. And knowing this – that one day the creation itself will be liberated and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God – changes everything. Now I can stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon, now I can enter the Yosemite Valley, now I can look out over the pounding waves of the Atlantic on Old Cape Cod, and see a window into our future. Now I can see New England in all its autumn glory and see a window into life after death.

It's what the stirring finale of the musical *Les Miz* tells us:

They will live again in freedom  
 In the garden of the Lord.  
 They will walk behind the plough-share.  
 They will put away the sword.  
 The chain will be broken  
 And all men will have their reward.

And it's the music we have always sung in church:

There will be peace in the valley for me some day;

There will be peace in the valley for me, oh, Lord, I pray;  
 There'll be no sadness, no sorrow, no trouble I'll see;  
 There will be peace in the valley for me.

There the flow'rs will be blooming,  
 and the grass will be green;  
 And the skies will be clear and serene, oh, yes;  
 Well, the sun ever beams  
 in this valley of dreams;  
 and no clouds there will ever be seen, oh, yes.

And it's the promise of Scripture – Romans 8:19-21 from the version *The Message*: “The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.” I can't believe the church hardly ever tells us this, but it's been there in Scripture all along. One day you will find the land for which you have been looking your whole life, and you will find it to be the world you have always loved preserved, though more rich and real than ever.

So as we end this series on “Salvation: The Quest,” I offer to you these things to consider as you decide whether to step fully, to step mindfully, into the world lit by resurrection and open to the spirit of God. What if the wonders of nature today foreshadow where we will live forever? What if sunrise and sunset every day recall the glory of Eden and prophesy Eden's return? What if Paradise will one day be entirely restored? What if the restoration of our world played out before us each spring and summer is precisely what God is promising us about our future? What if, as we venture further into heaven, we begin to recognize every rock and stream and tree? What if we discover, to our wonder and joy, that the world we love has been preserved though more rich and real than ever? That one day we come to the land we have been looking for all our lives – our true home? What if the reason that we so much love certain places on earth is that they sometimes look a little like the place to where we're going?

– Dale Pauls