

The Lion, the Mouse and the Dawn Treader

SPIRITUAL LESSONS FROM C. S. LEWIS'S NARNIA



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The Lion, the Mouse and the Dawn Treader: Spiritual Lessons from C. S. Lewis's Narnia

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For all who love Narnia,

AND ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO SEEK THE RADIANT LIGHT OF THE SILVER SEA

—AND BEYOND.

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Invitation to an Adventure



JESUS TOLD his followers, “[W]hoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). To put a more positive spin on this challenging statement, we who seek to live a Christlike life will do well to embrace the heart and mind of a child as part of our spiritual practice.

This is easier said than done. In our frantic and hyperpaced world, many of us are doing the best we can to make sure we get the bills paid and the dishes done. We barely have time to get a full night’s sleep; how can we afford to entertain the question of “entering the kingdom of heaven,” let alone try to figure out what it means to receive heaven “as a little child”?

I believe Jesus was trying to get his followers (and that includes you and me) to shut off the overly rational, excessively analytical mind, not in the interest of some sort of naïve denial, but rather in recognition that openness and even playfulness are helpful qualities whenever we try to

learn or understand something new. When we adopt such a childlike perspective, we open ourselves to listen for the still, small voice of God and see the hidden actions of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the ordinary miracles that occur every day (but that we are usually too busy to notice).

How, then, do we become “as a little child”? I certainly do not have all the answers. But one idea I do have is that we can seek the heart and mind of a child by doing some childlike things. And one of those things, which is the subject of this book, is to read a children’s novel—hopefully giving ourselves permission to read it *like a child*, which is to say, playfully and without being too critical or quick to judge.

This is tricky, and here is an example. The book I have chosen to explore with you is *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, one of the beloved Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis. The Narnia series consists of seven novels, written for children (of all ages), and each one offering insight into a different dimension of the Christian faith. As wonderful as these stories are, they were written in the 1950s, and sometimes they show their age. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* begins by making fun of people who do not drink or smoke or eat meat. Well, I am a nonsmoking vegetarian who doesn’t drink very much, so immediately my grown-up mind wants to argue with the author. Not a very auspicious beginning! So I have to remind myself that C. S. Lewis, writing more than

a half century ago, held an entirely different set of values about dietary and health practices than I do, or perhaps than most people do, today. And then I have to forget about it, in the interest of reading this book like a child.

I'd like to invite you to forget about all your adult tendencies to rush to judgment. Take Jesus at his word: "Do not judge" (Matthew 7:1), and simply enter into this charming tale about a magical sea voyage in a mystical land called Narnia. Maybe you are like me and you have been reading and rereading the Narnia books ever since you were as young as its main characters. Or, perhaps, you are new to these tales, having just stumbled across them recently. Either way, I invite you simply to be present with the tale, and to let it unfold.

C. S. Lewis has made no secret that these stories are filled with Christian themes and metaphors. Several of the Narnia tales feature plotlines that echo events in the Bible:

- ◆ *The Magician's Nephew* explores the themes of creation and the origin of evil, originally found in the book of Genesis.
- ◆ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* offers insight into the Gospel story of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus (through the Christlike figure of Aslan, the noble Lion).

- ◆ And *The Last Battle* looks toward the end of time and the hope of eternal life, similar to themes in the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation to John.

By contrast, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* is not directly related to any stories in the Bible. Even so, it may be the most useful of the seven Narnia books, for it is the one that most directly maps out the contours of the Christian spiritual life.

Since the earliest centuries of the Christian era, mystics and saints have described the spirituality of Christian living in the language of *journey*. Christians are, according to the greatest exemplars of the spiritual life, walking along the way of the pilgrim: we are ascending Mount Carmel, climbing the stairway of perfection, or scaling the ladder of divine ascent. In a more abstract way, mystics have described the life in Christ by talking about successive stages—such as *purgation*, letting go of everything that holds us back from God; to *illumination*, moving more deeply into God's radiant presence; and finally, *union*, arriving at that most mysterious of places, where we truly realize that “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Likewise, one of the greatest literary traditions in the Christian world, the story of the quest for the Holy Grail, serves as an allegory of the Christian life. So the mystical dimension of following Jesus can be understood both as a

journey and a quest. This is the foundation on which C. S. Lewis built the story of the *Dawn Treader*.

If you are not familiar with the Chronicles of Narnia, you are in for a treat, and I suspect that if you read just one of these books, you'll want to read all seven. Taken as a whole, the Narnia series tells the story of a number of English children who, over about a sixty- to seventy-year period, discover various portals through which they can move into an alternate reality: a land of magical talking animals and sometimes frightening confrontations between forces of good and evil. Narnia is ruled by the good and noble Lion, Aslan, who comes "from over the water." Aslan represents Christ, and is the true hero of the Narnia Chronicles, more so than the children who voyage from our world to his.

Along with the three Narnia tales that have clear connections to Biblical events, four other novels consider other dimensions of faith.

- ◆ *Prince Caspian* examines the need to be faithful, even when it is not popular or safe to do so.
- ◆ *The Silver Chair* considers the importance of perseverance and mindfulness—paying attention to the "signs" we have been given of Divine guidance.
- ◆ *The Horse and His Boy* explores the psychology of conversion—of longing for the sacred mystery that

Christians call God, and finding one's true home in the heart of the Divine.

- ◆ And finally, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* is the novel where, instead of instructing his readers in biblical truth, C. S. Lewis navigates another important dimension of the Christian faith: the stormy seas and calm waters that reveal the nature of the lifelong spiritual journey.

Of course, this needs to be understood as a metaphor. The *Dawn Treader* makes for a great story, but in reality we are not all sailors, navigating through uncharted seas in search of lost people or hoping to find heaven on earth. But we do all “sail” over the deep waters of our individual lives. Sometimes these waters are peaceful and quiet, and at other times they are dynamic and dangerous. We visit many “islands” over the course of our lives: the lands of childhood, of education, of romance and marriage, of career, of parenting, and eventually of retirement and old age. As earthly Christians, we seek the guidance of “Aslan” as we know him—Jesus, the Son of God. Sometimes he seems very close, and at other times quite far away.

So let's turn to *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and see how this charming children's tale has, encoded in it, much of the wisdom and insight about spiritual living that has come down to us over the centuries from the great mystics and

saints of the Christian world. It's a great adventure story on its own terms. But when understood as a metaphor for the mystical life, *Dawn Treader* becomes even more wonderful. It's wonderful because it can help ordinary folks like you and me to recognize, understand, and appreciate all the many aspects of the spiritual journey. Like all adventure stories, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* features good guys and villains, challenges and trials, moments of suspense and times of serene wonder and quiet joy. But what sets this story apart from so many others is this recurring theme: at the heart of the journey, but also at its destination, resides a great, glorious, and personal Presence, who guides and loves all who seek him. It is this very Presence who gives the sublime moments of the adventure their beauty, and who also gives all the trials and challenges their meaning. When you and I explore the *Dawn Treader* and its voyage to the end of the world (and beyond), we are invited to seek after this Presence in our own lives. In other words, we are invited to embark on our own unique adventure.

So what are we waiting for? Let's go!

The Land of the Lion



BEFORE WE DIVE into *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, let's take a look at the realm of Narnia—the magical otherworld created by C. S. Lewis as the backdrop to the story of Aslan, the awe-inspiring Lion.

If you are not familiar with the concept of an “otherworld,” it comes from Celtic mythology—the mythology of lands such as Wales and Ireland (C. S. Lewis was born and grew up in Belfast). The ancient Celts were very spiritual, as their myths and legends attest. They believed that intimately connected to the “real” or visible world were magical realms where gods, goddesses, fairies, and even the spirits of the ancestors live. The otherworld might exist parallel to the physical world, or perhaps underneath it (the “underworld”), or even just somewhere beyond the ocean. Much Celtic lore concerned stories of mortal human beings who encountered the inhabitants of the otherworld, sometimes even traveling to this mysterious alternate universe by various means.

In our time, this concept of an alternate universe—an otherworld—is a recurring motif in children’s literature. Harry Potter travels to a school for witches and wizards via a magical train; Alice finds her Wonderland by falling down a rabbit hole; and Peter Pan lures the Darling children to Neverland by helping them to fly (with the aid of a little bit of pixie dust). The children in these adventure stories often find that their journey to the otherworld involves some sort of quest or challenge. By completing the quest and overcoming the obstacles along the way, they learn lessons and develop skills that will aid them even after they return to the mundane world.

The heroes and heroines of the Narnia Chronicles have their own quests. Whenever any of them travel from their ordinary lives as children in England to the magical realm of Narnia, a task or a challenge of some sort awaits them. Some of the children embrace their quest, while others seem to do everything they can to avoid their calling. Regardless of whether they accept or resist the purpose for being in Narnia, one thing is for sure: they are all changed by their experience there.

What truly sets Narnia apart from most other alternate worlds is the explicit Christian character of the land, and especially of its supreme being, Aslan. Although C. S. Lewis insisted that the Narnia Chronicles are not allegories, they all contain a clear spiritual message. Lewis knew that

children love a good story, and that sometimes the best way to understand a principle or an idea might be to see it enacted in a fictional or a mythical setting. So, even though the Narnia Chronicles are so well crafted that everyone (including people who have no interest in religion or spirituality) can enjoy them, for those of us who do choose to discern the hidden (mystical) meaning of the stories, they come alive with rich layers of insight—into God, into human nature, and into the dynamics of how God relates to us mere mortals.

An important part of any mythical otherworld is its quality of magic and wonder. C. S. Lewis weaves a sense of wonder into Narnia in three ways: first, by endowing many of the animals of Narnia with the gift of speech. Second, he populates Narnia with exotic and unusual beings such as fauns, centaurs, and minotaurs—characters who have their roots in earthly myth and legend, but who come vividly to life under the genius of the author's pen. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, for example, mermaids, dragons, sea serpents, and even a fallen star appear at various stages along the journey. But the third source of wonder in these tales is by far the most important, and this is Aslan himself. Described as the “Son of the Emperor-Over-the-Sea,” Aslan is the true and compassionate ruler of the land; he is loving and kind but uncompromising in his commitment to goodness, justice, and virtue. The children who serve as the

heroes and heroines of Narnia—such as Lucy, Edmund, and Eustace—all have profound and life-changing encounters with Aslan.

Narnia is itself a beautiful land, filled with majestic forests, rolling rivers, mountains, marshes, plains, and deserts. Lewis, like his friend J. R. R. Tolkien, created a mythic world rich with bucolic splendor. If you read all seven of the Narnia Chronicles, you will learn of the entire history of this land, from when it was literally sung into existence by Aslan, through successive ages of kingdoms and conflicts (several of which are decisively aided by earthly children), to its last days, marked by an apocalyptic conflict with a glorious resolution. From the great forests of the west, the land of Narnia stretches to a coastline on the east, where—of particular importance to the *Dawn Treader*—a sea stretches out beyond the Narnian shore, all the way to the very end of the world, where the sun rises. Beyond this sea, and beyond the very end of the world, lies Aslan's country, where he resides, along with his mysterious father.

Like earth, Narnia suffers from the existence of evil, seen in characters with names like Jadis or Shift, who oppose Aslan in several of the chronicles. Interestingly, though, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, while featuring a few minor bad guys like Gumpas and Pug, does not revolve around an epic tale of good versus evil. Rather, most of the conflict

explored on the *Dawn Treader* is the kind that each and every one of us faces—within ourselves.

One interesting quality of Narnia is that time progresses there with no correlation to the passage of time on our earth. So a child can slip away into Narnia, stay an afternoon—or a decade—and return to find that barely a second has elapsed here in our world. Likewise, a year passing in our world might correspond to centuries or even a millennium of Narnian time. In fact, the entire history of Narnia, from creation to the end of Narnian time, takes place within a single lifetime in our world (that of Digory Kirke, who is one of the more important characters in the Chronicles as a whole but who does not appear in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*).

No character, aside from Aslan, appears in all the Narnian stories. Aslan himself seems rather unpredictable, coming and going as he pleases, playing a significant role in some stories but being seemingly almost absent altogether from others. He does appear rather frequently in the *Dawn Treader* adventure, but often to just one or a few characters at a time, and then only briefly. But whenever he does appear, something significant happens.

The otherworld of Narnia is, as C. S. Lewis insisted, not meant to be seen as an allegory for our world, where each element of Narnia symbolizes something about earthly existence. Rather, the magic, the fauns, the talking beasts,

and the sylvan splendor of Narnia are simply enjoyable elements of a rollicking good adventure story (or, rather a suite of stories), providing a mythical setting where the various characters can discover the lessons and principles of spirituality—of encountering and relating to the Great Lion himself. Hopefully, the boys and girls who come to Narnia from England will take these lessons and principles to heart, and thereby lead renewed and transformed lives once they return home. Meanwhile, we who read the Narnian books (and watch the motion picture adaptations of them) may likewise be renewed and transformed by the insights we glean from Aslan and his dealings with the boys and girls of our world. We might only hope to visit an otherworld like Narnia in our dreams—but we can still reap the benefits of this otherworld, whenever we take from these stories insights and ideas that can nurture our spiritual lives, here in the “real” world.

So, now, let’s turn our attention specifically to the most mystical of the seven Narnia Chronicles: *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

The Journey Begins



EVERY STORY has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It's more than just a platitude that your seventh-grade English teacher told you: it's true of your "story," your life adventure, as well. Christianity, likewise, places great emphasis on the beginning of things. The biblical books of Genesis and the Gospel of John stress how God is engaged in the act of creation, from the very first moment of time. And God is intimately present in your and my "beginnings" as well: he is always calling to us, beckoning to us to take that first, all-important step on the adventure of spirituality. As we will see in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, sometimes the call to begin a spiritual adventure comes even when we least expect it.

Speaking of beginnings, it's a good thing I first read *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* when I was a youth. Otherwise, the second time I read it (at age twenty-six), I might not have made it past the very first page.

C. S. Lewis begins this story by zeroing in on Eustace Clarence Scrubb, a scientifically minded youngster who seems to be part nerd and part bully. To explain how this boy got to be so awful, the author notes that his parents were vegetarians and didn't drink or smoke. Maybe in 1952 this worked as a type of humor, but in 1987 (let alone today) it just seemed to fall flat. Being a vegetarian myself, I had to fight the temptation to feel insulted by Lewis's heavy-handed attempt at a joke.

Thankfully, I'm more forgiving nowadays than I was in my twenties. I realize that Lewis was simply poking fun at the kind of person who believes that, by managing their own health and maximizing their "human potential," they don't need God and certainly can't be bothered with religion. I've come to realize that some vegetarians can be as irritating about their diet as some Christians are about their faith. "Have you been born again?" and "Do you realize what meat does to your arteries?" are, in polite conversation, functionally equivalent in their certainty to do little more than annoy the person to whom the question, always in an accusing tone, is posed.

So I'm willing to decide that Alberta and Harold Scrubb were not just teetotaling nonsmoking herbivores, but they were militant about it all. And they passed on to their son, Eustace, who turns out to be one of most important characters in this adventure, their smug sense of pride

at how well managed their life seems to be. For this is, ultimately, what the Scrubbs are all about: pride.

Eustace has two cousins, Edmund and Lucy, who appeared in two previous Narnia adventures, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*. The cousins are visiting him while their parents and older siblings are otherwise occupied, and no one seems particularly happy about this arrangement. Eustace taunts his cousins and takes every opportunity to boss them around; they, meanwhile, struggle to maintain a basic sense of civility in his presence.

One day Lucy admires a painting of a ship in her bedroom, and she and Edmund remark about how it reminds them of a Narnian sailing ship. Overhearing them, Eustace (who thinks they are playing a game) teases them, but before their interaction can escalate into an all-out fight, the painting magically comes alive. Suddenly, the three children find themselves plunged into the ocean of Narnia, where the ship—the *Dawn Treader*—comes to their rescue. Edmund and Lucy are thrilled to suddenly find themselves back in this land of wonders and delight, while Eustace, shocked and upset at how his life has suddenly spun beyond what he could easily control, reacts with anger and vitriol.



Notice how the three children do not themselves choose to visit Narnia. Granted, Lucy and Edmund would have

gladly accepted any invitation to return to Aslan's world, but that is just to say that they were *disposed* to going. They were on call, so to speak; ready, willing, and able to leave our world behind for the adventure of Narnia. But they were also resigned, if not happily, to the fact that they themselves could not choose when to enter Narnia. Their willingness was, in essence, a gift to Aslan (the majestic Lion who is the lord of Narnia), without any expectation or sense of entitlement in return. They wanted to make the journey, but knew that all they could do was *respond* to a call—if it ever came.

Eustace stands in a different place, however. Smugly arrogant and used to thinking about life in terms of the dynamics of dominance and submission, he dismisses Narnia (like all spiritual talk) as only so much hogwash, and believes that this magical land is nothing more than a product of his cousins' overactive imagination. Even if he could be persuaded that Narnia *were* real, he'd have no desire or intention to visit the place. For Eustace, only that which can be turned to his advantage has any merit or value. Nothing has any value in itself; everything has worth only insofar as it can be used or exploited. A magical land filled with talking creatures and governed by codes of chivalry and traditional ethics and morality? Eustace would probably say that such a place sounds, at best, unimaginably dull.

Nevertheless, Eustace is summoned to Narnia right alongside Lucy and Edmund. Stunned and infuriated by this turn of events, his desire to keep the circumstances of his life under tight control are, as it turns out, utterly useless to protect him from Narnia's call. Here, then, is our first lesson about the spiritual journey: we enter it not merely by virtue of our own desire, but always at the pleasure of God.

In other words, whether or not we *want* a spiritual adventure ultimately makes no difference. Incidentally, I'm using words like *spirituality* and *mysticism* more or less interchangeably, but they do have different meanings. Spirituality refers to the dimension of living intentionally in relationship with God, whereas mysticism implies a can't-miss-it experience of God's presence in our lives, even to the point of feeling at one with God. Evelyn Underhill, a renowned Christian writer, called it "a life based on . . . conscious communion with God."¹ Another theologian, Karl Rahner, once famously said, "the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all."² This suggests that, at least as far as Christians are concerned, spirituality (relating to God) sooner or later will include a dimension of mysticism (experiencing God's presence). But that may take many different forms. Even some of the holiest Christians

1 Evelyn Underhill, *Mystics of the Church* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1925), 10.

2 Karl Rahner, *Concern for the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 149.

(for example, Mother Teresa of Calcutta) often are more aware of God's seeming *absence* than God's felt *presence*.

It seems that many people who desperately want mystical experience never receive it—or, perhaps better said, never seem to receive the call in precisely the way they would *like* to receive it—while others who have no interest in spirituality or mysticism whatsoever might find their lives suddenly shattered wide open by the intrusion of the numinous in their lives (“numinous” is another word that refers to the experience of the presence of God).

Certainly it is a good thing to desire such numinous, mystical blessings, for being so disposed enables us to receive God's gifts with joy, in whatever way or at whatever moment they may be granted to us. But having such a desire cannot guarantee if, or when, or how, we will receive such an extraordinary, transformational blessing—just as having no interest in spirituality cannot guarantee that we will be untouched by its impact. This first lesson about the mystical life teaches us an important, foundational truth: mysticism is always God's call, and our experience (or non-experience) of God remains always and entirely at his pleasure.

If this kind of thinking makes you bristle, I hope you will try to make your peace with it now. For this theme of “God's in charge and you're not” will recur again and again throughout the *Dawn Treader's* journey.



The Point of Departure



S. LEWIS DID NOT consider himself a mystic. In one of his final books, *Letters to Malcolm*, he describes a mystic as someone who scales the high mountains of prayer, whereas Lewis presents himself as someone who never makes it beyond the foothills. I think he was being humble, but he also was operating with a narrow definition of “mystic” as someone who has truly extraordinary and even supernatural experiences of God’s presence. Other respected Christian thinkers, such as Evelyn Underhill or Karl Rahner, saw mysticism in a much broader and inclusive way—involving not so much a *supernatural* relationship with God, but simply an *experiential* one. In this sense, not only was Lewis no doubt more of a mystic than he gave himself credit for but indeed, Karl Rahner was right: *all* Christians are called to the mystical life.

While Lewis may not have considered himself a mystic, he certainly was interested in mysticism, as David C. Downing demonstrates in his book *Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C. S. Lewis*. Downing writes, “Given his habit of grappling with theological issues both critically and creatively, it is not surprising that Lewis’s interest in mysticism, mentioned so often in his essays and letters, should find imaginative expression in the Narnia Chronicles.”³ And while mystical elements may be found in all seven of the Narnia books, none describe the mystical life as fully as *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

In *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis refutes the idea that mystical experiences are an end in themselves. As he saw it, mysticism, by itself, is neither good nor evil; it is the content or the object of mystical experience that determines its ultimate value. “Departures are all alike; it is the landfall that crowns the voyage.”⁴ In other words, any kind of mystical experience is simply a “departure” from normal awareness and ordinary reality. It’s like seeing a glorious site in nature—the Grand Canyon, for example—for the first time. The beauty, the vastness, the austerity—these all combine to create an experience of wonder, or of humility, or even of ecstasy. Or, think of how some people’s lives are

3 David C. Downing, *Into the Region of Awe* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 127.

4 C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1963), 65.

changed when they encounter suffering, or poverty, or other forms of human need. The experience of compassion and sadness in the face of human misery can change a person's life forever (here, again, Mother Teresa is a great example). But an experience, in itself, does not make someone a mystic. Whether an experience is one of great joy, or love, or sorrow, or suffering, or even a more "classic" mystical experience of feeling God's presence in our hearts, we need to ask: where does this experience take us? Lewis goes on to say, "The saint, by being a saint, proves that his mysticism (if he was a mystic; not all saints are) led him aright; the fact that he has practiced mysticism could never prove his sanctity."⁵ In other words, mysticism does not necessarily make a person a saint, nor does sanctity necessarily make one a mystic. For Lewis, there's no contest: if we have to choose between being a spiritual master and a holy person, seek holiness. Better to be humble and holy than to be mystical and lost in the illusions of our own egos.

This principle underlies the action in the early chapters of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. The first half of the book is very much Eustace's story—and at first Eustace is, frankly, not a very likable character. He is lazy, arrogant, whiny, quick to criticize but slow to lend a hand. And, as one might expect from a person with his character (or lack thereof), he is utterly oblivious to how others perceive him. He is so

5 Ibid, 65.

busy contemptuously finding fault with everyone else that he never bothers to look into a mirror and truly consider his own foibles. Humility, compassion, and kindness are words that seem to be utterly absent from Eustace's vocabulary.

Given his almost cartoonish flaws, one might wonder why, when Lucy and Edmund were summoned back to Narnia, Eustace was summoned as well. After all, just minutes before the three children are spirited away to the *Dawn Treader*, Lucy and Edmund were alone with the magical painting. As troublesome—and unhappy—as Eustace turns out to be, wouldn't it have made much more sense all the way around if he had been left back in England while his cousins made their adventure without him?

Of course, the answer to this question echoes the principle we considered in chapter one: that mysticism is ultimately God's action, and God can call whomever he chooses—even a thoroughly “undeserving” character like Eustace. But just because God calls someone to the spiritual life does not obviously make that person “holy” or “mystical.” As Lewis so clearly understood, mysticism (or spirituality in general), by itself, does not make a saint out of a sinner.

Indeed, when Edmund and Lucy (with their older brother and sister) first ventured to Narnia (a tale told in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*), Edmund was, if anything, even worse than Eustace, and his actions had far graver consequences. But just as Edmund found

a change of heart in Narnia, so, eventually will Eustace. Their transformations, however, came about not because of where they were, but rather simply because of the choices they made. It is conceivable that Edmund and Eustace could have gone to Narnia and never experienced a change of heart; likewise, they could have had such a conversion experience even if they had never visited Narnia at all. It is our choices that matter, even more than what spiritual or mystical experiences we do (or don't) have.

Why is it that some people have powerful, life-altering experiences of God, while others never do? It seems not to matter whether one is a believer or not. Perhaps the most famous conversion story in Christian history is that of St. Paul, who had set off on a journey to persecute Christians when he experienced a mystical vision of Jesus. This vision left him temporarily blinded and dependent on the kindness of strangers—in fact, of Christian strangers (this is all the more dramatic since Paul was famous for his persecution of Christians, and indeed could have had his benefactors arrested). But following his mystical encounter with Jesus, Paul had been transformed. He gave up his former life and became a great leader of the New Testament church.

The kind of dramatic, earth-shaking event that Paul experienced is, at best, extremely rare. The vast majority of Christians are humble believers who never experience anything “supernatural”—but rather go through their

entire lives with little more than their faith and the support of their church to guide their spiritual lives.

It is a mystery why this is so. We can assume that when it comes to mysticism, God knows what is best, and while some people do seem to experience extraordinary, miraculous encounters with the Ultimate Mystery, most others have a much more down-to-earth spirituality. It is wise not to compare ourselves with others, and to trust that each of us is given the type of spirituality (and experience) that is best for us. It's also important to bear in mind that a sweet experience of God does not make us holy, or sanctified, or better than others. True holiness, in fact, is related to humility, which often leads us to be painfully aware of how *flawed* we are, not how "good" we are. Holiness requires not experience, but faith, commitment, a change of heart, and a willingness to let God remake us according to his design.

The Captivity of Sin



ONE OF THE MISSIONS of the *Dawn Treader* is to find seven missing lords from Narnia, who sailed into exile during the reign of Miraz the Usurper. Now that Caspian is the rightful king of Narnia, he has embarked on this voyage to find the seven noblemen, or at least learn of their fate. The first stop on this journey is the Lone Islands, where one of the lords will be found—but in the midst of a most unpleasant adventure.

A landing party consisting of King Caspian, Edmund, Lucy, Eustace, and Reepicheep the Mouse disembark onto the apparently uninhabited island of Felimath, while the *Dawn Treader* sails around it. But before they can rendezvous with the ship on the other side of the island, the landing party runs into a group of men who turn out to be slave traders—who promptly kidnap them. Thankfully, a landowner comes by and purchases Caspian from the slavers; he turns out to be Lord Bern, the first of the missing Narnian lords. After he

and Caspian reveal their identity to one another, they begin to plot how to rescue the rest of the captured party.

With this unhappy turn of events, C. S. Lewis turns his attention to one of the most important topics for anyone who is serious about the Christian life—and yet, a topic that is singularly unpopular in our time. What I am referring to, of course, is sin. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis uses three dramatic metaphors for sin:

- ◆ being sold into slavery;
- ◆ being turned into a dragon;
- ◆ and using magic to gain power over others.

The dragon and magic metaphors both involve questions of individual choice and responsibility, as the occasion of sin involves someone acting alone (Eustace and Lucy, respectively), whereas the slavery metaphor has a social dimension, in which an entire society is involved in the sinful action. I think Lewis was quite wise to present the “slavery” metaphor first.

The concept of sin has become unpopular in our day because previous generations made the mistake of overemphasizing sin as strictly a matter of personal immorality, and underemphasizing the social dimension of sin. When Christians seem to be overly concerned with sexual ethics, but turn a blind eye to such systemic evils as racism or poverty, it is no wonder that society as a whole

has become suspicious of the concept of sin. It seems rather hypocritical to guilt-trip people for their individual actions while ignoring what most reasonable people would agree are far more serious matters of injustice, oppression, and abuse.

But if our society has made progress toward addressing systemic ills such as racism or harm to the environment, perhaps we have ironically become too lax in regard to our standards of personal conduct and individual character. Widespread substance abuse, broken families, white collar crime, and materialism (financed by excessive debt) all seem to suggest that there is a price to be paid for ignoring old-fashioned ideas such as virtue, honor, and responsibility. Sin may be out of fashion, but it appears to be very much still with us.

Against both the historical tendency to overemphasize sin as personal immorality, and our current tendency to de-emphasize the same, Lewis provides a balanced view, recognizing that sin has both a social and a personal dimension. First, he looks at the social nature of sin, as symbolized by the slave traders. And look at who gets captured by the slavers: not just “sinful” Eustace, but also Lucy, Edmund, Reepicheep, and Caspian himself. The message is that sin affects everyone, no matter one’s disposition, gender, social status, race, or creed. Whether someone seems to be good-natured or evil-tempered makes

no difference. Social sin implicates everyone and ultimately wounds everyone.

As Lewis recounts the story of Caspian's company falling prey to slave traders, it could be easy to see this as a simple story about oppressors and their victims. Certainly, a key feature of sin is that it often entails institutionalized forms of oppression and abuse (for example, part of what made racism so pernicious in American society was the existence of Jim Crow laws, by which racism was literally written into the legal code of many states). A lone person who is a racist is simply unpleasant and despicable, and while such a person can be dangerous if violent, the scope of his wrong-doing will be relatively limited. But an entire racist society is capable of horrific, wide-scale evil. As wrong as it is for individuals to be bigoted, the true scope of this, and all, collective sin is only truly revealed in its corporate, social, and institutional forms.

Lewis hints that when Caspian decides to take a landing party to the apparently uninhabited island of Felimath, he is making a bad decision due to his inexperience as an adventurer. In truth, all of those who accompany him do so willingly. The author is not blaming the victim, but he is suggesting that there is folly in carelessly placing oneself in harm's way. We could see this as a way of suggesting that social sin is always complex, and involves not only the evil of the predator, but also the mistakes of the prey. Sin,

after all, comes from a Hebrew concept with a meaning like “missing the mark” (as an arrow shot that flies wide of its target)—in other words, a mistake. So, while sin is generally understood in the sense of willful rejection of the will of God (and, therefore, intentionally unloving), a full understanding of sin implies that even innocent choices that enable or unwittingly abet the cause of abuse and oppression ought to be recognized as mistakes in their own right. Someone who neglects to install a security alarm is not guilty of a sin—but when their house is burglarized, they nevertheless pay a price for their carelessness. Social ills such as racism and sexism are not just the problem of people who are racist and sexist—rather, we are *all* obligated to work together to help liberate our world from such scourges.

Whether arising from willful evil or negligent mistakes, sin always undermines love and separates us from God and from one another. But the spiritual life is a journey toward becoming a more truly loving and caring person, both toward God and toward others. Christianity teaches that God has empowered us with the ability to fight against sin and evil, whether this means overcoming temptations to say hurtful things to those we love, or engaging in a more public struggle against such evils as human trafficking or gang violence. In a very real way, Christianity (in its truest, fullest and most authentic expression) always stands against injustice, oppression, abuse, and slavery.

Therefore, the Christian spiritual life necessarily involves struggle against sin in all forms. Hopefully anyone who accepts the call to the adventure of the mystical life will not in any way support racism, sexism, classism, or other forms of oppression. But even sincere followers of Christ will encounter these and other evils in our lives, and will have to address the ways in which we have unwittingly tolerated, or even contributed to, such ills. Every one of us who embarks on the spiritual life will have to come to grips with the fact that sin, in one way or another, has enslaved us all. As Saint Paul sorrowfully noted, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:19). If sin causes us to do what we do not want to do, in a very real sense, it has enslaved us.

So before we go any further on our spiritual journey, we need at least to begin to deal with this problem. For you and me, this means finding ways to free ourselves from anything in our lives, big or small, that stands in the way of more fully loving God (and each other). That could be as simple as overcoming a bad habit of swearing, or as life-changing as leaving an abusive relationship. Perhaps we also need to consider how we contribute to larger-scale issues like economic inequality or global warming. None of us can solve all our problems, let alone the world’s problems, by ourselves—or overnight. But at this point in the journey, what matters the most is simply getting started.