**Going to Heaven With C.S. Lewis**

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*As with Dante’s glimpse of the beatific vision in the final Canto of the “Divine Comedy,” we are all ultimately rendered speechless in the presence of ineffable Beatitude. We do not have the words to describe the Word. And yet Lewis gives us in the final lines of “The Last Battle” glimpses of glory which even the great Dante would struggle to surpass.*

Last week we took a trip to hell and purgatory with C.S. Lewis, courtesy of his book *The Great Divorce*. This week, Lewis takes us to heaven, courtesy of *The Last Battle*, the final book in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

*The Last Battle* is the darkest and most “grown-up” of all the books in the ever-popular Narnia series. From the very first pages, things are bad; and they continue to get worse. It is painful, almost unbearable reading, especially if one is reading the story to a child. All is gloom-laden. The very air that breathes from the pages is full of portents of doom. The pace quickens until the portents of doom lead us to the portal of doom itself. We come to realize that, inside a stable, the demonic god Tash is demanding sacrifice. One by one, people and talking beasts alike are shoved through the stable door to meet the devil himself and a fate worse than death.

“It is indeed a grim door,” says Tirian, last King of Narnia. “It is more like a mouth.”

“Oh, can’t we do *anything* to stop it?” says Jill in a shaken voice.

“Nay, fair friend,” says Jewel, ever faithful and ever hopeful. “It may be for us the door to Aslan’s country and we shall sup at his table tonight.”

For the faithful soul, crossing the threshold of death is the necessary step into the Kingdom of Heaven. There is no other way. We must cross that threshold, however fearful. We must cross it, even if we fear the devil. We must cross it, even if we fear that it leads to the very gates of hell, as indeed it might. If, however, we truly love with the power of the One who loves truly, we have nothing to fear from the gates of hell, for we know that they shall not prevail.

As the good and faithful souls are thrust through the stable door, the very threshold of death, they find themselves in a strange and wonderful place. “Tirian had thought—or he would have thought if he had time to think at all—that they were inside a little thatched stable, about twelve feet long and six feet wide. In reality they stood on grass, the deep blue sky was overhead, and the air which blew gently on their faces was that of a day in early summer.” Finding a grove of trees laden with beautiful fruit, they are tempted to pluck and eat. Surely such fruit can’t be meant for them? But it is. “It’s all right,” says Peter. “I’ve a feeling we’ve got to the country where everything is allowed.” Everything is allowed because evil is absent. Absolutely absent. If all that is wrong has been vanquished, nothing is wrong!

Looking around, they discover the stable door, standing alone in the middle of that beautiful countryside. There is no stable. Just the door. But looking through a crack in the door, they see the same evil people by the light of the fire. Life, as the evil people knew it, was still going on, just as before. But it was a very different life from the life that those who have crossed the threshold are living. It is the difference between a shadow-life lived among shadows, and a real life lived in the light of life itself.

“The stable seen from within and the stable seen from without are two different places,” says Tirian.

“Yes,” says Lord Digory. “Its inside is bigger than its outside.”

“Yes,” Queen Lucy agrees. “In our world too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.”

Life, true life, the fullness of life, is larger than any world in which death holds sway. God, who is life, true life, the fullness of life, is larger than any world He’s created. The Christ Child was unthinkably larger than the manger in which he lay.

Lewis, with his singular and customary brilliance, tells us, through the voice of Aslan, that Father Time was only dreaming through the centuries of history. What we call time was only dream-time. The life we know before death is a dream-life in a shadow-land. It is not fully real because it is not fully awake. “While he lay dreaming his name was Time,” says Aslan. “Now that he is awake he will have a new one.” Heaven is finally being fully awake! “Come further in!” Aslan cries, with laughter in his eyes. “Come further up!”

As they follow in the direction in which Aslan had run, they have a strange sense of déjà vu. There’s something familiar about the landscape. “Narnia is not dead,” says Farsight the Eagle. “This is Narnia.” And yet, whispers Lord Digory, it’s “more like the real thing.” Taking the ideas of Plato and infusing them with a Christian understanding of God’s Creation, he explains why all that God creates and sees as good cannot and does not die. Where they had lived in the dream-time was not the real Narnia. “That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here: just as our own world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan’s real world…. And of course it is different: as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream.”

“I have come home at last!” says Jewel. “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…. Come further up, come further in!” Following Jewel, they plunge into the glories of this Always New World. “Faster and faster they raced, but no one got hot or tired or out of breath.” No fatigue. No discomfort. No shortness of breath. Motion without inertia. No boredom, which is only the psychological inertia of those not fully awake in wonder. Only wonder. Always wonder.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” says Lucy. “Have you noticed one can’t feel afraid, even if one wants to? Try it.” Fear is impossible because there is absolutely nothing to fear. And there’s always more of all that’s good. Limitless goodness seen with endless wonder. The further up and further in we go, the bigger everything gets. The inside is larger than the outside. “World within world,” says Lucy. “Narnia within Narnia.” “Yes,” says Mr. Tumnus, “like an onion, except that as you continue to go in and in, each circle is larger than the last.”

At some point, even C.S. Lewis’ marvelous skills as a writer cannot go any further up or any further in. An earthbound soul, even one with his eyes fixed on heaven, can only see glimpses of the goodness that awaits the good and faithful servant. As with Dante’s glimpse of the beatific vision in the final Canto of the *Divine Comedy*, we are all ultimately rendered speechless in the presence of ineffable Beatitude. We do not have the words to describe the Word.

And yet Lewis gives us in the final lines of *The Last Battle* glimpses of glory which even the great Dante would struggle to surpass. This being so, I will do in deference to the brilliance of Lewis what T.S. Eliot did in deference to Dante. I shall merely point to him and remain silent. There’s nothing else to do but listen and wonder:

*“The dream is ended,” says Aslan. “This is the morning.” And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.*