

EXCERPT FROM *THE WORLD TO COME*, Derek Leman  
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## Chapter 7: Hints of Heaven

The undying lands in the West. Avalon beyond the mists. The realm just beyond our grasp, as near as a touch but as far removed as life after death. Heaven is an idea that stirs the imagination.

In C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, heaven is a place much more substantial than earth. One of the citizens of heaven says:

All hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is really smaller than one atom of this world, the Real World. Look at yon butterfly. If it swallowed all Hell, Hell would not be big enough to do it any harm or have any taste.<sup>1</sup>

It is a land that goes on forever into the west. Upon arriving for a holiday in heaven, the main character gets a glimpse to the west:

But very far away I could see what might either be a great bank of cloud or a range of mountains. Sometimes I could make out in it steep forests, far-withdrawing valleys, and even mountain cities perched on inaccessible summits. At other times it became indistinct. The height was so enormous that my waking sight could not have taken in such an object at all. Light brooded on the top of it: slanting down thence it made long shadows behind every tree on the plain.<sup>2</sup>

The green hills roll ever on and on beneath a clear blue sky. Crystal streams trickle over soft brown stones decorated with verdant moss. Every image we have of a better land, a land of fantasy, light, goodness, and truth, is a possible image of the World to Come.

Is it safe to enter a forest there or to journey into the mountains? On earth there might be dangers in such beautiful places, but in the World to Come there are no perils any more. Could there be beauty without danger? Adventure without risk? Joy without pain? Here we cannot imagine such a thing, but there it will be reality.

This present world is a world that smothers the heart. In our hearts we long for beauty, truth, and lasting joy. Yet in this world beauty is marred. Truth is veiled. Joy inevitably gets corrupted or destroyed. This present world teaches us to harden our hearts, not to expect too much joy. We live with heartache, try not to become black-hearted, and hope for more with all our hearts.<sup>3</sup>

Still all that doesn't mean we don't feel. Our hearts face death, but stubbornly refuse to die all the way. We keep returning to the desires of the heart, never fulfilled but always there. This is not a feminine or a masculine thing. It is universal. Men and women desire to love and be loved, to triumph and know adventure and mystery. We call someone who lacks these desire heartless. But heartlessness is an illusion. No person is really heartless. The desire for adventure and beauty is universal, even among those who fight against it to live in cynicism.

Children long to conquer the high seas or play the hero. Girls desire a prince to come and woo them. Boys crave an adventure, a quest worthy of great courage. Some continue this longing in their experience of art, seeing a ideal world in a painting. Some continue it in stories or literature or movies. We all travel this world of the heart in our imagination, sometimes perverted but ideally pure, even holy.

C.S. Lewis found it in many places in imagination, nursery stories, poetry, and literature. In *Surprised By Joy*, he describes it:

It is . . . an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which here is a technical term and must be sharply distinguished from both Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one

characteristic, and only one, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. Apart from that . . . it might also equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want. I doubt that anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is.<sup>4</sup>

Joy is what men and women are seeking in cheap sex but which they can never find. It is what a beer and some friends might buy for a few moments, but which is not fully achieved. It is why we seek entertainment, to escape to Joy for a brief vacation of the soul.

Could Joy have anything to do with the hereafter? Did God leave some Joy in the world after the Garden was closed?

### **The Way God Restores**

You could think of this present life as a sort of exile. In many ancient cultures a crime could get you exiled. The Romans were fond of this punishment for people of noble position who committed a crime. To be exiled is to be forbidden to return home. So we find ourselves in exile. Our home is paradise, but we are exiled to a lesser land. We find in ourselves a longing for our true home, like a Roman noble exiled to a foreign land.

Yet a Roman exiled to a place like Asia Minor would still find some Roman life there. Some foods would remind him of home. He might see some people traveling from Rome and long to be back where he belongs. In the same way, we get glimpses of our true home from this present exile.

In the Bible, the people of God were once exiled to Babylon. Maybe we can find in the Bible a hint of how God treats people when they leave exile and return home. Maybe we can get some idea of what awaits us at the end of our exile. Maybe we can see in Israel's story of

exile and return some hint for our greater future. We get just such an opportunity in the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah was a court prophet during the eight-century B.C.E. He was alive during the awful time when Assyria came and crushed the northern tribes of Israel. Yet down in the south, where Isaiah lived, the kingdom of Judah survived. Yet it was revealed to Isaiah that Judah was headed for its own disaster.

The disaster would not come for a little over a century after Isaiah's lifetime. Being a prophet, however, God gave Isaiah messages for the future. The prophet delivered God's words warning people of a coming exile. It would be a time of unimaginable horror. Yet God also gave Isaiah a positive message for the time after the exile was over. Isaiah wrote prophecies specifically for people who would not be born for two centuries.

Many scholars have trouble believing Isaiah wrote the entire book attributed to him. It seems odd that God would give a prophet messages specifically for generations as yet unborn. Starting in Isaiah 40, that is exactly what we have, an eighth century prophet speaking to sixth century people.

### **Comfort, Comfort My People**

The first words of Isaiah to the people coming out of exile are, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."<sup>5</sup> God is no longer punishing or casting Israel into exile, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned."<sup>6</sup>

When God's people come out of exile, his way is comfort. God offers consolation from grief and anxiety. God offers to heal the heart. The exile is over and the heart should be allowed to heal.

Isaiah 40 continues and speaks of a people brought back to freedom, released from exile. The prophecy paints a picture of a new relationship between Israel and the God of Israel: "He will tend his

flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”<sup>7</sup>

Imagine a painting with rolling hills dotted with flocks. This is a familiar scene in the Middle East. The shepherd is there and the sheep are his life. He carries one lamb against his bosom. The bosom is located at the heart. To be held in the bosom is to be close to the heart. God promises to hold Israel close to his heart. Imagine God as your shepherd and ask what joy could be greater.

Meanwhile, down here in exile-land, we are tired. We doubt. We survive in a heartless land. But, again speaking to Israel coming out of exile, God has a promise: “Those who hope in Adonai will renew their strength, they will soar aloft as with eagles' wings; when they are running they won't grow weary, when they are walking they won't get tired.”<sup>8</sup>

All the heartaches will be removed. Our spirits will be renewed. God heals the hearts of his returnees. Here, in the present earth, the heart faints. In the World to Come, the heart will be restored. “Delight yourself in Adonai and he will give you the desires of your heart.”<sup>9</sup>

### **A Text Alongside the Bible**

The Bible does not tell us everything about the World to Come. Yet it tells us enough to know more than what it says. From the Bible we determine that there is another text, one that lies alongside the Bible and prefigures the World to Come.

The desires of the heart point the way. The unsatisfied desire will at last be satisfied. Joy will be real.

A family enjoys a day hike in the clear mountain air. It is a sign. A woman enjoys a story of love found at last. It is a sign. A child looks longingly at a picture in a storybook. It is a sign.

We can experience signs every day, though we easily overlook them. We can be reminded a thousand times what the World to Come may be like. It is there in beauty. We can simply look at the face of our

spouse and see a hint of heaven. We can curl our toes in green grass and know paradise is real. We hear a child's innocent laughter and we can imagine. We forget ourselves and fall into the joy of friends and conversation, and we can imagine true companionship that will never end or lead to disappointment.

Just as John saw at the end of Revelation, the New Jerusalem comes down over the old. The new earth is both like and unlike this present earth. The love, laughter, and light we desire here is the reality of the World to Come.

God has given us more information about the World to Come than we might think. Artists seek to capture it sometimes in paintings. Writers try to evoke a sense of it when describing fantastic lands. We know about the World to Come because of desire, the deepest desires of our heart. God has truly written eternity on our hearts, as the Preacher in Ecclesiastes said long ago.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1946), p.122.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Curtis and Eldredge for this insight into heart-language. Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* (London: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, 1956), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 40:1 (ESV).

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 40:2 (ESV).

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 40:11 (ESV).

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 40:31.

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 37:4 (ESV).

<sup>10</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:11.