

Title:

I Shall Live Like a Narnian

Teaser:

In this session, Brian Brown, co-editor of *Why We Create*, explores the hidden enchantments of our world that cloud our vision and stunt our creative process--and how to live and create as people who have been through the wardrobe.

Text

Intro

Good afternoon.

I'm sure most of you remember the moment in *The Silver Chair* when the Queen of Underland walks in on Jill, Eustace, Puddleglum, and Prince Rillian just when they were about to leave and look for Narnia. She quietly throws some green powder on the fire and begins strumming a musical instrument, and everyone begins to feel drowsy. Their senses dull, and their ability to comprehend reality deadens. They try to tell her they've seen things from Narnia, and she laughs and tells them they are just imagining pretend things based on things in her world. The longer she talks, the deeper they fall under her enchantment.

The enchantment of our age: alienation between matter and spirit

Now, before we go any further, I need to say something about enchantment.

When we try to articulate the idea that we want to learn to see our own lives and our own world in a more Christlike way, a way that does justice to deeper spiritual realities, a way that's more like what we see in the Narnia Chronicles, we can do so in two contradictory-sounding ways. The first is to talk about *re-enchantment*; we are concerned that we have a materialistic worldview and we rightly think Christians shouldn't. The second is to talk about *disenchantment* or *breaking the enchantment*; we are concerned that the *reason* we have a materialistic view is that our eyes are actually blinded, by a spell so to speak, to something that's truly there for us to see, right under our noses.

I think there is value to both of these approaches, depending on the context of our conversation, but for the purpose of this conversation, I'm going to take the second approach. We're going to dig into this moment from *The Silver Chair* a bit, and Scripture and other sources a lot. **Because I believe that like in that moment in the story, there is great lie, a great evil enchantment of our age, that prevents us from seeing and living like Narnians.**

In this time, I'm going to do three things. First, I'm going to show you this enchantment—I think you'll recognize it. Then, I'm going to show you the reality behind the enchantment. And finally, I'll leave you with some thoughts on how we can live in light of that reality.

**

Okay, let's start with the enchantment, the great lie. The lie is this: that there is no relationship between Narnia and Aslan's Country; between our reality and God's; between matter and spirit.

I'm sure you've encountered this. It plays out in slightly different ways in different Christian circles, and what non-Christian company you keep. For a good while now, many Christian churches have drunk at the well of the surrounding culture, and our culture the last few decades has been on a schizophrenic journey from materialism to anti-materialism; from saying if we can't see it and touch it it's not real, to saying our feelings or for that matter our digital persona trump what we can see and touch.

So tell me if any of the following ideas sound familiar:

First: the world is bad. My body is bad. Stuff is bad. Things I enjoy are probably bad and I should feel guilty for enjoying them. I just need to fix my eyes upon Jesus, and "the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace." And I ought to be profoundly distrusting of things that give me pleasure. After all, Saint Paul says:

- "Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit."¹
- And Saint John says, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."²

So food, drink, sex, dancing, smoking, music, movies, anything that might give me pleasure are deeply risky things to get into; and I have great trouble justifying them spiritually when, after all, there is a Bible I ought to be reading, or some good works I ought to be performing. And not only is the material world bad, in the grand scheme of things, it's not even what's really real. Perhaps I've even absorbed this quote, which has become a prevalent meme, but was never *actually* uttered by C.S. Lewis, that "you *are* a soul; you *have* a body."³ Bottom line, best case scenario, material reality, space, is like Bruno; we don't talk about it.

Or maybe you've encountered this with more of a focus on *time* rather than *space*. This life doesn't matter, only the next one does. "Only one life, 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ shall last." Which is understood to mean that only the things *focused on that next life* shall last, usually evangelism. I'm supposed to view this world as a prison, which someday I will escape. "This world is not our home." We seek God by transcending the here and now, "come Lord Jesus." Perhaps the focal point of the Christian faith as a whole is even framed as what happens after you die—are you going up or down on the elevator? In the face of such eternal questions, how can I justify my vocation that has apparently nothing to do with getting me or anybody else into the elevator going up? I mean, I don't recall the last time I saw the pastor call up the newly minted lawyer or construction worker during church for special commissioning and blessing!

¹ Romans 8:5

² 1 John 2:15

³ For a more detailed account of the history of this apocryphal quotation, see Hannah Peckham, "'You Don't Have a Soul': C.S. Lewis Never Said It," in *Mere Orthodoxy* (5 July 2012), at <https://mereorthodoxy.com/you-dont-have-a-soul-cs-lewis-never-said-it>

Why do so many Christians see the world this way?

We shrink from the here and shrink from the now, in an effort to avoid what we see as a grade-A sin, which is to love the world, the stuff, the here and now, for its own sake; which is to say, to create an idol out of it. We humans have a tendency to zero in on the things we are absolutely positive will make us happy, we absolutely cannot live without, and tell God we're in charge of those and He can't have them. Christians are so (rightly) afraid that, as Calvin said, the "human heart is a perpetual forge of idols,"⁴ that we think the best way to avoid idolatry is to avoid the things we might make into idols. After all, as Jonah said, "Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love."⁵ So we look at our corporate worship, at how we pray, at our vocations, at our entertainment choices, at our daily lives and routines, with the eye of a paring knife, seeking to fight our own temptation towards idolatry through cutting down to the essentials—"if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you." Right? We don't always succeed, of course, but that's the mentality. To be good Christians, we have to be on a mission to shorten the list of things in our lives that might be spiritually unhelpful or distracting, to the point where that list is often full of things most of our ancestors would have considered essential to Christian faith and practice.

And what's the result of all this? What is its impact on me? I find myself in my proverbial prayer closet, beset on all sides by a material world that is my enemy, hounded at every moment by the march of time that is running out, profoundly alienated from every primary aspect of my own existence, and haunted by my constant failure to truly access the eternal and the spiritual like I'm convinced I ought to. I cannot live in the world as I ought, because the accepted list of "Christian" or "spiritual" activities is woefully short, and for everything else, *I have no theological or mental category between idolatry and indifference*. Right? I'm so frightened of ascribing *ultimate* worth to something, that I'm afraid to ascribe *any* worth to it. So the vast majority of activities that make up my typical week, I see as neutral or secular at best. I can't find a place for them in the kingdom of God.

But my friends, this entire dynamic is the great enchantment of our age. It's what the Lady of the Green Kirtle, the queen of Underland, is after at the climax of *The Silver Chair*. She doesn't just want the children and Puddleglum and Prince Rillian to *believe* there is no Narnia. She wants them to *live in Underland* as if there is no Narnia—all while knowing that the way to Narnia is *through her own land*, right there for them to find if they only seek.

Unveiling the reality: good, symbolic, and sacramental

You see, as Lewis understood when he wrote *The Silver Chair*, the story of the Christian Bible is quite different from this dynamic of alienation. In my 10 years of work toward "a renaissance of the Christian imagination," there are two consistent things that I've seen draw people to that goal. The first is the enjoyment of things *like* the Narnia chronicles that make people see more transcendently. The second is *the hope that we're supposed to*. The idea that some of those things we love most *ought* to be a part of the kingdom of God, even if we can't quite explain how. There's a reason people have that hope, whether they know it or not, and it's this: reality is very different from the Green Lady's account of it.

⁴ John Calvin (tr. Henry Beveridge), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 11 (1536, reprint: Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 54-55.

⁵ Jonah 2:8

In fact, I'm convinced that for us to live more like Narnians, we must first understand how to *see* more like Narnians. We have to fix our relationship with material reality. In the Chronicles, Lewis gives us a fictional world that very clearly has meaning and magic woven into every layer of it. The reason that appeals to us is that it is a reflection of *our* world as we're supposed to see it, even if we've forgotten.

You see, Scripture and the consistent teaching of the historic Church give us a threefold way of understanding our world, an understanding Lewis shared, that is utterly different from what I've been describing, and that most of you in this room did not grow up with.

And it is this:

- First, the world is *from God* (which is to say, it is good)
- Second, the world is *of God* (which is to say, it is symbolic and points to His character)
- Third, the world is *for God* (which is to say, it is sacramental and participates in the life of heaven)

When we unpack the significance of these innocent-sounding ideas, what we find is a completely different relationship with this world, including how to live in it. So let's take each of these in turn, so that we can understand how to *see* like a Narnian; and after we've done that, we'll unpack the significance of each point for how to *live* like a Narnian.

**

First, the world is *from God*. Okay, surface level, obvious; in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...and over and over, we hear, "God saw that it was good." He gave us a world filled with beauty and truth and goodness, a world that could meet our needs and then some.

Now the goodness of this creation does not consist in its ability to *get us into someplace else someday*, or because it is *useful* to our ends—it is *intrinsically good*. It is *beautiful*. You're really off the deep end if you look at a rose or the ocean and think, "Well *that's* useless for getting me into heaven!" In fact, there's something about following God that draws us out into His creation, doesn't it? Indeed, in the crucial moment in *The Silver Chair*, who is it who is best able to remember Narnia? Puddleglum, the one who has known it best and loved it longest.

So if we're going to figure out how to live as God wants, we're going to have to grapple with this good physicality of our existence. Lewis explains, in *Mere Christianity*:

*"There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it."*⁶

But do we really pause to consider the wonder of this? Why did God, who is not made of matter, make a whole world of matter, and make us of matter, and put us in it? What does it mean to truly see the magic at every turn, pausing to truly behold what He has made? I love the way Robert Farrar Capon puts it;

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952, reprint: San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 64

“One *real thing* is closer to God than all the diagrams in the world.”⁷ He devotes an entire chapter of one of his books to meditating on the wonder that is an onion. God’s creation is full of a magic of its own; worth our pausing to truly *behold* at every turn.

We could spend our entire session just on how to do that and it would be time well spent, because it is a lifetime’s art to learn. In my book *Why We Create*, the book I co-edited for Square Halo books, Gracy Olmstead recounts this story from Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*:

A character named Father Zossima tells the story of his brother Markel, who died as a teenager. As he became ill, Markel experienced a remarkable conversion to Christianity. Some of his last words, related by Father Zossima, are captured thus:

[Looking at the first birds of spring], he began suddenly begging their forgiveness: “Birds of heaven, happy birds, forgive me, for I have sinned against you too.” None of us could understand that at the time, but he shed tears of joy. “Yes,” he said, “there was such a glory of God all about me: birds, trees, meadows, sky; only I lived in shame and dishonored it all and did not notice the beauty and glory.”

“You take too many sins on yourself,” Mother used to say, weeping.

“Mother, darling, it’s for joy, not for grief I am crying. Though I can’t explain it to you, I like to humble myself before them, for I don’t know how to love them enough.”⁸

Markel gets the effect of the great enchantment: “we are surrounded by God’s glory, and amid that glory, we have not loved enough.”⁹

Sometimes I hear the suggestion that viewing the world this way is to denigrate the value of the sacred by saying everything is sacred, and I acknowledge that is a thing we can do; for example, I see pseudo-Christian social media influencers who talk about how everything is sacred who’ll also say that the space of, say, a church or a graveyard has no special significance. What they’ve done is essentially *downgraded* everything; kind of like in *The Incredibles*, everything’s special, so nothing is.

That’s the opposite of what I’m proposing. One way to think about it is that we’re not saying ordinary things are sacred—we’re saying *there are no ordinary things*. The things we think are ordinary are more holy than we’ve dared imagine, charged with the grandeur of God—and yet the hierarchy of the holy goes higher still. The not-so-ordinary things are just the beginning, and we’ll get to that in a moment.

Now maybe you’re thinking, “Yes, that’s all very well, but the world is fallen.” Yes, there is sin in this world, but I think we tend to overestimate the Enemy—he is not an evil opposite to God, he is a finite creature. And while he convinced us to sicken or dirty what God has made, he does not have the power

⁷ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection* (1967, reprint: New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 21.

⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky (tr. Constance Garnett), *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: The Lowell Press, 1930), accessed via Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28054/28054-h/28054-h.htm>.

⁹ Gracy Olmstead, “The Art of Cultivation,” in Brian Brown and Jane Scharl, *Why We Create: Reflections on the Creator, the Creation, and Creating* (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2022), 93-4.

to change its nature. That's why God Himself so often uses the language of *washing clean*, not *replacing* or *transcending*.¹⁰

Maybe you're listening to this and thinking I'm wasting time saying something incredibly obvious, but the great enchantment of our age is predicated on skipping this crucial truth. I cannot tell you how *rare* it is for me to meet someone who tells me that they were raised in a church that emphasized the *creation* part of the story; they think Christianity is a two-chapter story, beginning with sin and ending with salvation, instead of recognizing that the Bible starts with *creation* and ends with *consummation*—to put it in hero's journey terms, sin and salvation are the inciting incident and the climax, but they're not the beginning and the end. If our story is only one about sin and salvation, we will of course struggle to know what to do with a great number of things, including how we spend most of our time. But if we understand what we were created for, there's hope that we can understand what we were redeemed for. How to live like a Narnian.

So I've proposed the first of the three-fold understanding of reality—an elevated sense of the goodness of Things—but I've suggested it's just the beginning of a ladder. Let's go further up and further in, and discover the second piece.

**

The world is *of* God. It doesn't just bear the fingerprints of God in a superficial sense. It actively reflects His nature at every turn. We don't often think about this, but theologian James Jordan puts it this way: we *could* have a god who made us directly depend on him for life, so we wouldn't need food; have eternal energy, so we wouldn't need rest; live on a flat pristine earth with no mountains or valleys, so we wouldn't trip or get distracted. *But we don't.* We worship a God who gave us hunger...and food. Tiredness...and sleep. Breath...and oxygen. Trees and flowers and gemstones and all the things that make up the physical world as we know it. And under the great enchantment, when was the last time you stopped to wonder *why?*¹¹ What do these things tell us about Him?

Let's take one example: Christian self-help writers and Instagram quote graphics and posters at Hobby Lobby are only too happy to remind us from the Psalmist that "The heavens declare the glory of God," and *stop there*—as if the phrase only means "The heavens remind us God is pretty." But that is not what glory means in Scripture; the glory of something is its nature, its character, its deepest essence. If I tell you I know the glory of something, your next question ought to be "Ooh, what is it??" And sure enough, Psalm 19 says that the heavens are telling us something *about* God:

- 1 *The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*
- 2 *Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.*
- 3 *They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.*

¹⁰ I love the Ash Wednesday prayer from my church, which begins thus: "Oh God, you hate nothing you have made." The Apostles Creed says we look to the *resurrection of the body*, and the life everlasting. And if we still missed the memo, God tells Peter, "Do not call anything unclean that I have made clean."

¹¹ James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988), 19.

4 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
 their words to the ends of the world.
 In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.
 5 It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
 like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
 6 It rises at one end of the heavens
 and makes its circuit to the other;
 nothing is deprived of its warmth.

The Christian tradition sees the world as bursting with meaning, full of signs pointing beyond themselves. Fourth century theologian Ephrem of Syria wrote, “In every place you look, Christ’s symbol is there, and wherever you read, you will find his types [symbols]. For in him all creatures were created, and he traced his symbols on his property.”¹² Or here’s Saint Paul in his letter to the Roman church: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine *nature* [emphasis mine; “glory”]—have been clearly seen, being understood from what he has made, so that people are without excuse.”¹³ Remember that quote from Calvin about the human heart being a forge of idols? He goes on to explain he doesn’t mean we create idols from nature, but rather that we look for meaning by looking *within*, to our own desires, and so we create for ourselves gods who are in fact smaller than we are—when in fact we ought to be looking for meaning *outside* ourselves, to the world and the God that are *bigger* than we are.¹⁴

It’s not just that there are signs *in* nature, but that all nature is itself a sign, pointing beyond itself in patterns within patterns within patterns; Trinitarian meaning and reflections of heaven everywhere—so that we who are not ready to comprehend the full mystery of God are being prepared minute by minute through interactions with refractions of His character. Scripture itself assumes that those who are reading it, God’s second book, have read that first book; and so it speaks of God by talking of rocks and trees and wine and lambs and fire and wind and countless other things...including the celestial beings in the heavens. They’re not just metaphors, made-up connections we impose on reality; they are reality itself. *We live in a symbolic world.*

¹² Ephrem of Syria, *Hymn on Virginity* 20.12; quoted in Seely Joseph Beggiani, “The Typological Approach of Syriac Sacramental Theology,” in *Theological Studies* 64 (2003), 544-45

¹³ Romans 1:20

¹⁴ “Hence we may infer, that the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols. There was a kind of renewal of the world at the deluge, but before many years elapse, men are forging gods at will. There is reason to believe, that in the holy Patriarch’s lifetime his grandchildren were given to idolatry: so that he must with his own eyes, not without the deepest grief, have seen the earth polluted with idols—that earth whose iniquities God had lately purged with so fearful a Judgment. For Joshua testifies (Josh. 24:2), that Torah and Nachor, even before the birth of Abraham, were the worshipers of false gods. The progeny of Shem having so speedily revolted, what are we to think of the posterity of Ham, who had been cursed long before in their father? Thus, indeed, it is. The human mind, stuffed as it is with presumptuous rashness, dares to imagine a god suited to its own capacity; as it labours under dullness, nay, is sunk in the grossest ignorance, it substitutes vanity and an empty phantom in the place of God. To these evils another is added. The god whom man has thus conceived inwardly he attempts to embody outwardly. The mind, in this way, conceives the idol, and the hand gives it birth.” John Calvin (tr. Henry Beveridge), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 11 (1536, reprint: Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 54-55.

I'll show you. Given enough knowledge of theology and biology, we could do this with absolutely anything in creation, but let's stick with what's in front of us; let's take a closer look at Psalm 19.

It says "In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber." The first thing we learn in Genesis about the sun is that it and the moon and the stars govern time, and that they are, what? *Signs and symbols*. And throughout the great tradition, the teachers of the church have seen in the sun an image of Christ; who is also referred to as the *Bridegroom*, and as the one who has come to *pitch his tent among his people*;¹⁵ whose restoration, like the sun's warmth, will reach to the ends of the earth. When he comes, Isaiah tells us, his glory will rise upon his people and bring the nations to their brightness.¹⁶ Lewis himself said that he believed in God like he believed in the sunrise; not just because he saw it, but because by it he saw everything else.

Not done yet. Jonathan Edwards and others argue that the moon is a symbol, among other things, of the church. It bears no light of its own but only that of the sun. It lives in the darkness, serving as the only reminder that the light will come again. It waxes and wanes, going through times of fullness and times of near-extinction, times of obedience and times of disobedience, but never losing the sun's light.

It's not that God lives in the sky on a cloud like in cartoons, but there is a real relationship between *heaven*, the dimension in which God exists, and *the heavens*, the place God fills with sun, moon, and stars. Indeed, it is in *the heavens* that God appears in His glory-cloud in the Old Testament, in view of His people, reminding us that God dwells in heaven, but desires to dwell on earth, when the earth is fit for Him. And in the heavens, from our earthly perspective, the sun and moon are surrounded by the stars, which we've known since Abraham represent God's people.¹⁷ And the heavenly bodies, governing time, also remind us of the permanence of God and His promises; we can look at the sun and the moon and the stars to learn something of who God is, even when times are dark.

When all is darkest in *The Silver Chair*, what is it that Puddleglum is able to remember, and shout that he has seen?

*"I've seen the sky full of stars. I've seen the sun coming up out of the sea of a morning and sinking behind the mountains at night. And I've seen him up in the midday sky when I couldn't look at him for brightness."*¹⁸

It is not an accident that Lewis, well-versed in the symbolism and cosmology of Christianity, wrote those lines!

And the Psalmist, writing Psalm 19 in full awareness of the words of Genesis and the frequent uses of sun, moon, and stars in the Torah, is *begging* you to pay attention to the silent voices of the heavens in order to know God better. Yet we share his first line, "The heavens declare the glory of God," like it's a meme, and *ask no further questions even of his own song*. And we do this over and over, with so many things God has made, even so many things whose symbolic nature is mentioned in Scripture, almost as if we are under an enchantment.

¹⁵ John 1:14; "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling [literally "tabernacled"] among us."

¹⁶ Isaiah 60:1-3

¹⁷ Genesis 15:5

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (1953, reprint: New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 176-7.

We live in a world whose biological patterns are full of microcosms of justice and mercy, and authority and submission, and unity and diversity, the sublime and the beautiful, the Trinity and the resurrection, and the very patterns and paradoxes of the life of heaven...a world that is calling to us, "Come and see! Come and see!"

...and we sit gloomily on our front porch, and wish that the world were more magical...you know, like in the great stories.

**

But I'm not even to the best part yet. There is a third level of meaning in our world. We've seen how the world is *from God*; it is a good and beautiful gift, and there are no *ordinary* things in it. (First level.)

We've seen how the world is *of God*; a symbolic chorus singing of the one who made it and crying for us to go deeper and deeper into the knowledge of Who He is. (Second level.)

And third, the world is *for God*; which is to say, it is sacramental and participates in the life of heaven.

I'm going to get really nerdy for a sec and then I'll zoom back out and explain why it matters.

A sacrament, capital S, is a visible sign of an invisible grace. It's not just a reminder of something else, it actually participates in the something else. While there are only two formal sacraments instituted by Christ, they are a reminder of the larger sacramental nature of reality. Lewis puts it like this in *The Great Divorce*:

*"Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in hell: and earth, if put second, to heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of heaven itself."*¹⁹

Remember how the heroes in *The Silver Chair* try to tell the Green Lady about the sun by saying it's kind of like the lamp, but bigger? We often do this when trying to imagine heaven sometimes as well; it must be full of the things we like, but better. We'll finally have a pony. The beer will be better in heaven. And so on.

The reality is the opposite; the things of heaven are the primary things, and the things we love on earth are but a shadow of those things. But that's not to dismiss them. The material things aren't just stuff—like Ramandu told Eustace in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, a star isn't just a flaming ball of gas; that is only what a star is made of.²⁰ Earth and heaven do in fact have a relationship, one that Lewis called sacramental. It is our role as the image of God to recognize that relationship, and as stewards, govern the earth so that the earth itself participates in the life of heaven.

God didn't put us in a material world to keep us from Him. He put us here to bring us close to Him. This is the final piece of the puzzle; He doesn't just want us to know *about* Him here, He wants us to *know*

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (1946: reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 11.

²⁰ "Pictures are part of the visible world themselves and represent it only by being part of it. Their visibility has the same source as its. The suns and lamps in pictures seem to shine only because real suns or lamps shine on them; that is, they seem to shine a great deal because they really shine a little in reflecting their *archetypes* [*emphasis mine*]. [...] [They are not a sign, but something more than a sign;] if I had to name the relation I should call it not symbolical but sacramental." C.S. Lewis, "Transposition," in *The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses* (1949; reprint, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 102.

Him here. In our alienated world, we have forgotten that in more than their physical senses, breathing can be communion with God; eating can be to receive life from God;²¹ singing can be to take God's breath and God's words and send them back to him; that the gifts of God are all opportunities to be pulled deeper into His life.

If you're like me, you're probably still struggling to wrap your head around this third point right now. It's so different than what we're used to; we're not used to looking at our *own* world like it's magical. But it gets a bit simpler if we use the most obvious example God Himself gave us. God so badly wanted to lavish His grace on us *through* material reality that He Himself *became* it. He didn't become a ghost, or a vision, or an avatar; He became an *actual* man. Any time theologians have tried to dodge the *actual man* part, they've fallen into heresy—and likewise any time they've tried to disconnect the physicality from the divine. Christ was both. The creation was itself the means of the re-creation.

We remember this every time we take communion. Most Protestants have picked up this mythology that it is a Protestant thing to insist the bread and wine are “just stuff,” but the Reformers were actually adamant that Christ literally met and infused His people with His presence through communion. Their disagreements, both with Catholics and with each other, were not about the real presence of Christ. And in communion, we don't just look *back*—we look *forward*, to the day when God's presence will fill the whole earth. In the meantime, we, His Body, are His instruments, doing the work of Christ in making the world “commune” more and more fully with Him. Think about what that means for our vocations and our communities and even our hobbies! It's quite a different picture of our purpose than the one that says it's all about getting into the elevator going up, isn't it? In ways we don't fully understand, what we do with the things that appear to decay echoes in eternity.

The world is good in itself, but it is not *just* good in itself. It is symbolic, but it is not *just* symbolic. If it were either, that would be enough cause for praising God for His goodness to us. But it is good, symbolic, *and sacramental*; it is a cosmic tapestry full of the life of heaven and taking part in the story of heaven. Our role is to accept it in all its spiritual, not just physical, dimensions, and join with Christ in the life of heaven.

I haven't taught my children to close their eyes when they pray, not because it can't be helpful in focusing, but because it trains them that to seek God they must shut out the world He put them in; to look past it and to look around it rather than to look *through* it. *But the future of “stuff” isn't for it to fade away; it's for it to become fully imbued by the larger heavenly realities of which it is a small part.*

This is why our hope that our world and our churches ought to be more like Narnia is so reasonable. When we read great stories, or hear transcendent music, or walk into a cathedral or onto a mountaintop that makes us instinctively whisper, or have those moments of longing in which we yearn for a home we've never seen, we are feeling a *reality*; that we were made for the fullness of the Real, and it's there, on the other side of the thinnest veil.

And it still probably feels a tad abstract to you, and that's partly because we're trying to wrap our minds around something *heavenly*. But it's also because in a way, you don't understand sacramentality by *looking*, but by *entering in*. So hang on, we'll dig deeper in a moment.

²¹ Paraphrasing Schmemmann 17

**

First, it's important to notice something at this point. If everything I've been saying is true, that picture of the world as worthless stuff from which we must escape starts to make a lot more sense.

Imagine I'm the Enemy, trying to do my nefarious work in such an age. I know the world of time and space is good, I know it's one great big hymn to God singing of Who He is, and I know the role of humans within it is to make the hymn louder and stronger and more beautiful. Wouldn't I be *heavily* invested in messing with that whole arrangement? I'd want you all alienated from the rest of creation, unsure how to use such tools for the glory of heaven, or even falling over yourselves to teach your children that it's all gonna burn. I'd want you alienated from your own bodies, hating what you see in the mirror and only too glad to escape it via gender identity or surgery or rapture. I'd want you alienated from each other; male from female above all, ensuring you never notice how the image of God is made to work by putting differences together. And if I couldn't manage all that, I'd want you to worship some aspect of that physicality, following your ancestors Adam and Eve in claiming it for yourselves and telling God you cannot live without it.

One way or another, I can't have you seeing things for what they truly are. Because I know the less interested you are in looking closely at what God has made, the less clearly you will see the grandeur of God bursting forth from every atom of it, and the less powerfully you will seek to enter into the Christ-imbued life it promises.

How to live like a Narnian in light of this

So...what if we want to mess with the Enemy's plans? What if we want to do more than learn to *see* the world sacramentally? What if we want to *live* like Narnians, precisely where and when Evil wants us to think we can't?

We are not like the Narnians in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, just waiting for the good, green world to reappear and wondering if Aslan will ever return. We are like Puddleglum in the Green Lady's kingdom in *The Silver Chair*; we know Aslan is real, we know there's a greater dimension to the world, and we must live accordingly. Puddleglum feels the reality of the truth so deeply that he says "I shall live like a Narnian, even if there isn't any Narnia"—he's more willing to lose an apologetics argument than to abandon the way he knows he's supposed to live.

What kind of habits could be so important? Alexander Schmemmann explains it this way:

"The natural dependence of man upon the world was intended to be transformed constantly into communion with God in whom is all life. Man was to be the priest of a eucharist [a thanksgiving], offering the world to God, and in this offering he was to receive the gift of life."²²

We are both bodies and souls, straddling two worlds, able to see more than the animals of what God sees of both of them; and partially aware that our eternal destiny lies in the greater things rather than just the shadows of them. This is why I said the sacramental dimension of reality was easier to

²² Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 16-17

understand through participation than through seeing. Sacraments participate in the life of the greater reality, and we are called into that participation.

We struggle to wrap our minds around how to connect corporate worship on a Sunday morning with the idea that all life is supposed to be worship, because we are alienated from the theology in which all life matters—with the result that we devalue both normal life and the thing we call Sunday worship. But if we regain this understanding of the world as good, symbolic, and sacramental, we can begin to recover the Eucharistic life that ought to characterize the stewards of God, the redeemed *imago Dei*, the body of Christ.

Nowhere is this more clear than in Communion itself. If we look at the dynamic at play in the Eucharist, we can see how it models for us the dynamic of living like a Narnian in the rest of life.

- (1) It starts with *thanksgiving*. We present bread and wine at a feast, recognizing the goodness of God's gifts. This reminds us that out of everyone, Christians ought to take the *most* delight in good and true and beautiful things; we avoid both idolatry and indifference by seeing them for what they truly are: we look at both dimensions of the sacrament, the apparently ordinary bread and wine and the extraordinary gift of Christ's body and blood, and we proclaim, "Look what God has done!" To live like a Narnian in this first respect is to celebrate; there are moments for asceticism and for fasting, but they are always for the purpose of *feasting better*—we are practicing the discipline of thanksgiving, because it teaches us to truly pay attention, and to learn to accept the marvelous goodness of all the not-ordinary things. We cannot sweep them aside and say "I only need Jesus," because that is not what He Himself commanded. We cannot guilt-trip ourselves into a closer walk with Him, hating ourselves for not trying harder, when all He is longing for us to do is stop and accept the free gift He offers.
- (2) Next, we offer the gifts back to Him. We ask Him to use them for His purposes, and we do not hold back a crumb. In this, we acknowledge the symbolic reality; that the gifts of our world are ultimately for His world; that they are not merely bread and wine but symbols of something more. We offer Him our bodies and souls in a living sacrifice, because we recognize that only when we love earth as a part of heaven do we invite God's will to be done on earth as in heaven; for the earth to follow the pattern of heaven. And we remember that when we hold nothing back, He will transform our gifts into more than we could possibly have made on our own. And that it was always so.
- (3) And finally, we ask Him to do the real, sacramental work. We accept the tension that is so hard in our age; that we do not get to the body and blood part by looking past the bread and wine—the only way forward is *through*. Notice what it is that we offer Him. Isn't it beautiful that in the Lord's Supper, He does not say this wheat is my body, this grape is my blood? He meets us in bread and wine; beautiful things discovered by *human minds* and made by *human hands*? In this sacred moment He honors the role He has given *us* in His creative and redemptive process! And in doing so, He reminds us not only that our creative work in His world matters, but that as we go about His business renewing the world, He goes about His business transforming *us*.

What a picture this model gives us of the rest of life! Thanksgiving, offering, and transformation. It asks quite a bit more of us than our defaults of consumption and incoherent busyness do; it asks us to live generatively in order to offer our patch of the world up to God. We must have an insatiable desire to go further up and further in, plumbing the depths of the mysteries of God, which the Psalmist tells us are

the glory of kings to seek out,²³ and accepting the mantle of stewardship to master our crafts in cultivating our piece of the earth for heaven.

And yet in the end, that quest is in the end only an offering—it is Christ who does the real work, and it is in His work that we participate, in which we find that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. We are the moon, shouting to the universe when everything is dark that there *is* such a Sun—because it is His light we reflect.

And yes, it is dark. The sin-sickened material world *does* appear pitted against us, constantly hiding or perverting the symbols of God we want so badly to see. People, including us, struggle to relate to God because they had a bad relationship with their father. They struggle to trust in His love because their body has not given them the child they desire. They struggle to imagine heaven because their lives are conducted in the banal ugliness of asphalt and strip malls and cubicles. They struggle to remember their place in the Great Story because their streaming feeds are filled with nihilistic plots and narcissistic characters and no promise of redemption. They struggle to comprehend eternity because so often their back-breaking work yields only dead crops and they must start again.

But *we are here to stand against all of that*. We are the moon; we give thanks for the light, we reflect its glory on the earth, and we participate in its life amid the darkness. Like Puddleglum in *Underworld*, we respond to the mirage of the ordinary by living like people from Above.

That is how to live like a Narnian.

We live as if the world is *from God* (good), by giving thanks in the face of everything, and so learning to see nothing as ordinary. That means learning how to feast and practice hospitality, how to tell stories...and above all, to truly behold what He has made.

We live as if the world is *of God* (symbolic), by training our eyes to see him *through* his creations, not in spite of them—seeing them as prisms for glimpsing the deeper magic. That means learning how to see the Great Story running through everything, and how to reflect it in our own stories, our own families, our own churches.

And we live as if the world is *for God* (sacramental), by meeting him in *his* work, offering all of his creation back to him as his priests. That requires learning mastery of crafts, taking the time to understand what He has made and shaping it to His further glory. And it means giving up everything, trusting that when we hold nothing back, he will not only transform it, he will transform us.

Like Puddleglum said, to the Enemy, we might just look like babies playing a game. But by the grace of God, babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks the enchanted world hollow.²⁴

²³ Proverbs 25:2

²⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (1953, reprint: New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 182.