

A TALE OF TWO DRAGONS: REFLECTIONS ON CORRUPTION, CONVICTION, GRACE, AND SACRAMENT

Melissa Cain Travis on
a Restoration of Humanity

At the conclusion of *The Hobbit*, the reader is treated to one of Tolkien's hallmark codas — a short “extra ending” that follows the happily-ever-after. It has been years since the great adventure that resulted in the destruction of Smaug, and Gandalf and Balin have come to visit Bilbo Baggins to reminisce. Bilbo asks how the lands around the Lonely Mountain have fared since the extermination of the dragon, and the report is quite wonderful. The lands that were desolate are now prospering under virtuous leadership and cooperative efforts, and the wise use of the redeemed hoard of riches is contributing to the flourishing of all who live there. Harmony reigns among elves, dwarves, and men of the region. However, the old Master of Lake-town, a man prone to greed, has met his demise; upon receiving a large payment of gold for his townspeople's work, “he

fell under the dragon-sickness, and took most of the gold and fled with it, and died of starvation in the Waste, deserted by his companions.”¹ The “dragon-sickness” symbolism is difficult to miss: consumed by avarice, the old Master doomed himself to an excruciating and lonely death. Such are the wages of sin.

Fifteen years after the publication of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien’s fellow Inkling, C.S. Lewis, illustrated another nasty case of dragon-sickness. In his fantasy tale, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis illustrated the same idea — a deeply flawed character falling under the spell of a dragon’s hoard. He offers a more imaginative treatment of the soul-damage wrought by sin, but with a far different ending. In *Dawn Treader*, the sinner does not perish; rather, he experiences moral conviction, unmerited salvific grace, and an effectual sacrament. It is a conversion journey that takes him from monstrous to authentic humanity.

The opening line of *Dawn Treader* is a major indication that the reader should pay special attention to a particular unsavory character: “There once was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”² We quickly learn that Eustace is selfish, arrogant, and spiteful; he dislikes his cousins, the Pevensie children, and makes Lucy and Edmund’s lives miserable during their stay in his home. When he hears the two of them talking about Narnia, he makes fun of them — that is, until they are all suddenly and violently

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (1937; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 255.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 3.

transported through a painting into the cold waters of an other-worldly sea. Although they are rescued by King Caspian's Narnian ship and given a hearty welcome, Eustace's temperament does not improve. If anything, he becomes even more of an irritant to everyone around him.

When the *Dawn Treader* finally lands on an island after many days at sea, during which Eustace was miserable with seasickness, he selfishly sneaks off to avoid having to help with ship repairs and other exhausting labor. It is not long before he becomes lost, and in a panicked effort to retrace his steps back to the ship, he encounters something quite frightful emerging from a low, dark hole:

The thing that came out of the cave was something he had never even imagined—a long lead-colored snout, dull red eyes, no feathers or fur, a long lithe body that trailed on the ground, legs whose elbows went up higher than its back like a spider's, cruel claws, bat's wings that made a rasping noise on the stones, yards of tail. And the lines of smoke were coming from its two nostrils.³

Eustace watches as the dragon, which seemed to be “an old, sad creature,” slowly makes its way towards a pool of water, only to go belly-up before it has had the chance to drink.⁴ A sudden downpour forces Eustace into the cave from which the dragon came, and it is there that he discovers an immense treasure — a heap of

³ Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 84.

⁴ *Ibid.*

coins, jewelry, crowns, ingots, gemstones, and more. After musing about how he might use the riches to run off and make a life elsewhere, he falls asleep atop the vast hoard. When he awakes, something is horribly wrong. The truth dawns when he catches sight of his reflection in the nearby pool: “Sleeping on a dragon’s hoard with greedy-dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself.”⁵ The bejeweled bracelet he had placed on his upper arm while still in human form is now a source of inescapable pain, a pinching shackle that he cannot tear off, even with his teeth. Faced with the reality of what he has become (yet without actually thinking the word “dragon”), Eustace begins to weep in his desperate loneliness: “He realized that he was a monster cut off from the whole human race.”⁶ Thus begins his conversion journey. As Joseph Pearce writes:

In becoming a dragon, he would cease to be a dragon; in seeing the monster he had become as a mirror of the monster he had been, he experiences a desire for love, a desire for communion; in short, a desire for conversion...His becoming a dragon had allowed him to see the monster he had been, enabling him to desire a radical change in his life...His metamorphosis is the beginning of a necessary cure.⁷

⁵ Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷ Joseph Pearce, *Further Up and Further In: Understanding Narnia* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2018), 122-123.

Made sub-human by his sin, forced into awareness of his horrible bondage, Eustace experiences bone-deep conviction.

Once he has made himself known to the rest of the *Dawn Treader's* crew, he begins making amends and sincerely seeking their friendship — carrying out a penance of sorts — by working hard to be useful. Eventually, however, his dragon-ness will be what ultimately separates him from those he has come to love, because he is too large to go back aboard the ship. He does not know what is to become of him, and he is powerless against his terrible circumstances. Then, the pivotal moment arrives: Aslan appears and instructs Eustace to follow him up to the top of a mountain, to a crystal clear well of water. Aslan reveals to Eustace that he must undress from the dragon-y skin, but despite peeling off layer after layer, Eustace remains every bit a dragon. He cannot transform himself; his hide must be rent by the very claws of Aslan himself. Lewis's theological metaphor shines brightly here — we cannot save ourselves by our own efforts, it is only by the work of Christ that we can, by unmerited grace, be set free. This by no means implies a painless transformation, but there is extraordinary beauty in the restoration of our humanity as Christ resurrects it from the ashy ruins of our own dragonfire.

In a grand, sacramental finale, Aslan tosses the newly skinned Eustace into the cold, shimmering pool to be washed, fully healed, and re-humanized. The untame Lion then dresses him in new clothes, a gesture that, as one writer puts it, “illustrates that Eustace's true ‘boyhood’ is not something he has earned, but rather an

identity that is bestowed by Aslan.”⁸ Lewis’s marvelous imagery helps us grasp the deep meaning of the sacrament: through the holy, unfathomable depths of the baptismal waters, an extravagant gift is lavished upon us — the purest of garments, white as snow.

Having begun with a line about the monstrous Eustace, it is quite fitting that *Dawn Treader* closes with a passage about the redeemed and remade Eustace. Once the children are back in their own world, “everyone soon started saying how Eustace had improved, and how ‘You’d never know him for the same boy.’”⁹ His journey through awareness of — and conviction about — his dragonish soul leads him to a pursuit of goodness that yields some improvement, but it is only by grace that he is ultimately saved from the wages of sin, and it is the sacramental waters of the baptismal font that complete the restoration of his full humanity.

⁸ Elizabeth McLaughlin, “The Hero’s Journey of Eustace on the Voyage of Becoming: What Kind of Animal Do You Want to Be?” *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 4, Article 17 (2004).

⁹ Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 248.

Bibliography

A Tale of Two Dragons: Reflections on Corruption, Conviction, Grace, and Sacrament

Lewis, C.S. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. 1952; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

McLaughlin, Elizabeth. "The Hero's Journey of Eustace on the Voyage of Becoming: What Kind of Animal Do You Want to Be?" *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 4, Article 17 (2004).

Pearce, Joseph. *Further Up and Further In: Understanding Narnia*. Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2018.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. 1937; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.