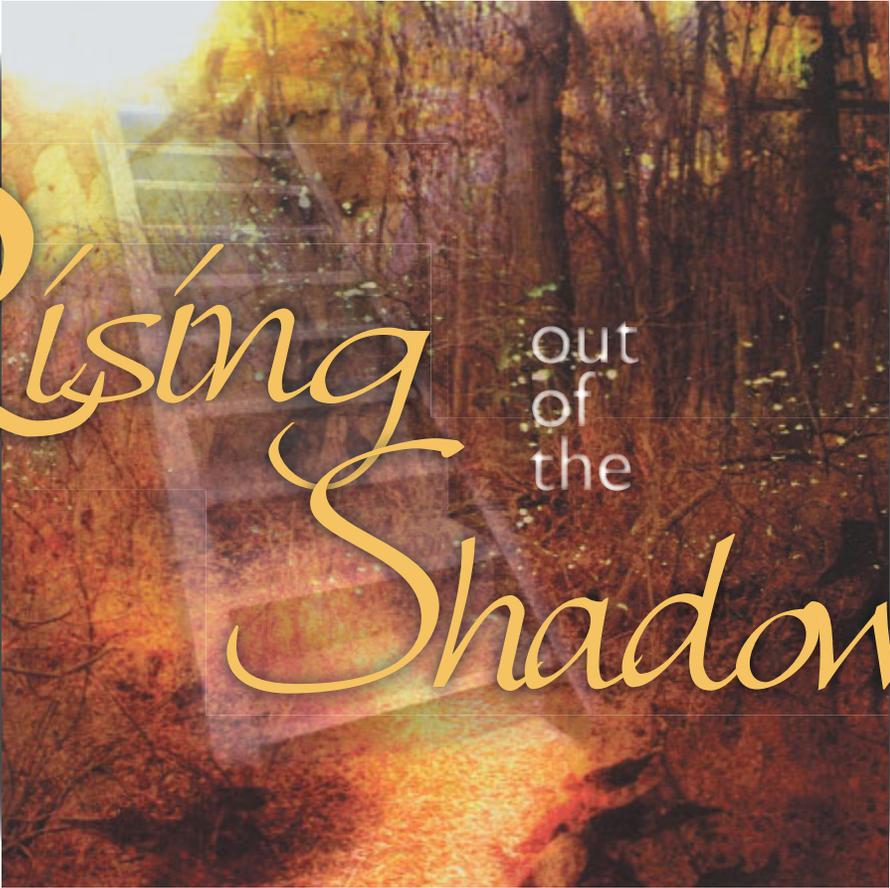


About death I go through different moods, but the times when I can *desire* it are never, I think, those when this world seems harshest. On the contrary, it is just when there seems to be most of Heaven already here that I come nearest to longing for a *patria*. It is the bright frontispiece which whets one to read the story itself. All joy (as distinct from mere pleasure, still more amusement) emphasizes our pilgrim status; always reminds, beckons, awakens desire. Our best havings are wantings.
(C.S. Lewis)



Rising out of the Shadows

Few things lighten the heart or brighten the aspect more than the songs of spring. After the death-like stillness of winter—a period in which even the few remaining songs are rarely heard from behind shuttered windows—the fulsome chorus of spring is something that reinvigorates the soul.

The church with whom we have been worshipping is located in the countryside, outside a small town. For the last two weeks our mid-morning departure has been greeted by the heart-lifting song of the meadowlark, especially loud and vibrant in the quiet Sunday morning air. And now, even though there is often a chill to the pre-dawn air, we happily leave open a window or two so that we might be awakened by the joyous arias and choruses of our early rising neighbors. There is no finer way to greet the new day than by their robust songs of praise.

For that is what they are. Oh, yes, it is true that in a temporal sense the feathered melodies have more to do with finding a mate, calling back a wayward mate, and chatting with each other, nest-to-nest, over the fence. But anything that lifts the soul skyward—anything that illumines or magnifies one’s vision of holy splendor—must surely have found its origin in heaven.

In the Shadows

Much of what mortals call living occurs in the shadows. Very little of what makes up our days could be considered godly, holy, sacred, or even righteous. That is not to say that God does not dwell as much in the mundane as in the sacred; He is in *every* part of a believer’s life. Neither does this mean that whatever is mundane is, perforce, sinful. But few things in our day-to-day existence exalt our God and His ways; relatively few things magnify or illumine Him in our minds. It is simply a fact of life that the mundane—brushing our teeth, getting dressed, consuming food, listening to the news, taking out the garbage, sleeping—occupies more of our time than those things that put us in contact with God.

Thus we must make a point of finding them—of finding and using those things that elevate and inspire.

The Fragrance of Heaven

The world in which we live is a leaden environment, with gravity being its most powerful natural law. It sucks us down and clutches us in its dark, insidious embrace. What we mean by “the world” is, of course, not the physical planet on which we dwell, but man—society, man’s system, the aftershocks of original sin.

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

(James 4:4)

Within this uncomfortable morass, however, God has placed stairways that lead us upward to Him—steps that lead us further away from the world’s shadows.

Surely one of his more delightful sets of stairs is the lilting refrain of spring songbirds. Only a few notes are needed to lift the soul pleasantly skyward, to elevate one’s step a few inches above the soil. The multilingual cardinal and brown thrasher, the meadowlark, red-winged blackbird, even the more monotonous calls of the grackle and pine siskin—all join in chorus to brighten the outlook of this earth’s sojourner. In a language uniquely theirs, given them by the Father, they speak of His kindness, His brightness, His joy—and how very much He desires to share these with us.

This season itself buoys the spirit. It speaks of resurrection, of life after death. What was brown just yesterday greets the new day with shades of birthing green. What was dried and cracked, is now moist with April rains. What was apparently dead, now springs back to life with the beginnings of leaves, new shoots, and the buds of blossoms that will become this summer’s fruit.

In the pasture spring calves gambol and prance with unabashed joy, then gather in the nursery to sleep as hard as they have played. New lambs frolic around and between their more sedate elders. The air is warm, yet still fresh and clean; the delicate scent of yellow and purple flowers is on the breeze.

Strangely, these bright, natural artifacts of spring do not pull us deeper into this world’s system. Though they are as irrefutably of this earth as the soil on which they grow, they are not made of gravity, but of exaltation. Their ebullient praise is not for the factory, the automobile, the highway or political system—not even for this world’s most exalted resident: man himself. No, whether they know it or not, their praise is for the Maker, the one who gave them life. The oxygen that sustains them has upon it the fragrance of heaven.

Overwhelming Joy

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. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is

not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

(1 John 2:15-17)

It takes little effort to find the steps leading upward—but it does take some. Our bent is *toward* the earth, not away from it. No matter how lofty our goals and aspirations, no matter how sincerely and deeply we love the Lord, no matter how profoundly we long for His presence and the caress of His Spirit, man is inexorably bound to the temporal plane so long as he inhabits flesh.

So we must seek out and cherish those stairways to God, those moments that quicken our spirit to His, that exalt and magnify Him even while our feet are dirty from this world’s clinging soil—moments not at all limited to the natural world. Surely, to a parent, there is holiness expressed in the face of a sleeping child, in the moment of first utterance, in the first tottering steps. Likewise, praise can overwhelm the breast when moments of joy—not just happiness or laughter, but sometimes even the exquisite joy of mutual sorrow—are shared between friends.

And there is that most specific stairway, the one we carry with us at all times: the stairway of worship-filled prayer. No matter our station, no matter our level of sophistication or knowledge, no matter our surroundings or dress—no matter where we are we can always ascend the stairway of intimate communion with our Father, and thus rise out of the shadows, and into His tender, loving arms. dsf