

*Lost Verses of Famous Carols*  
***Telling a Better Story***  
*2 Corinthians 5: 15; 1 Thessalonians 1: 8-10*

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In the back of the house where I grew up there was a walled garden area. In one corner was a small garden pool bordered by coral rock. On the edge of that pool stood a statue of a little girl looking down into the pool. On either side of her were concrete fish. In their mouths were fountain spouts. The idea was that as the girl watched, water would circulate through the pond and out through the mouth of the fish. It was meant to be a splashing, sparkling oasis. But I never saw it working. The bottom of the concrete pool was cracked and didn't hold water. I never even knew where to turn on the water. I was always told, "They don't work." The concrete girl had a hand broken off. Part of her calf was now just rusty rebar exposed when the cement split away. The garden pool was a ruin. I played out there a lot. I could imagine a day in the mythical past when clear water filled the pond and the fountains splashed in the Miami sun. The permanent wonder on the statue girl's face would be given a reason as she watched goldfish swim in the pool.

Yet, it was inconceivable to me that the fountains would ever work. Neither my grandparents or my parents expressed any interest in restoration. They seemed to feel as if fixing the fountains was a technological impossibility. Only the ancients had the skill for such artistry. Or perhaps they felt some dreamy amount of immense wealth from a bygone age would be required to remake it all. The ruin pointed back to a glory that once was. It stabbed me with the sense of loss. Because renovation seemed only a glorious impossible. You just can't fix something so beautiful that was so broken.

The story of that garden pool was foundational to my understanding of the world. Once upon a time there was something beautiful. Made by other hands than ours. By someone with greater wealth and desire. Someone reached for an image of a tropical paradise. They created it. But it broke. Only the ruins are left. But fixing the ruins is beyond what we can do. The beauty of the past is a longing that can never be filled except in imagination.

That's a story that runs through us. The world is beautiful. Yet, deep down, we feel that once it was more beautiful. The world was meant to be more. *We* were

meant to be more. But the power of decay and chaos is just too much for us. All you can do is just hang on, doing your best to meet basic needs and stay comfortable. You just have to learn to live with the sadness that something beautiful has faded and won't come back. Good things get wrecked.

This story runs through our most important relationships. We dream of love in a harmonious family. We have memories of moments where we felt such love. Perhaps only briefly, so briefly. But they are gone. The dream is broken. The harmony has collapsed. The loved one has departed. She won't be back. We can't go back home. We just have to learn to live with the sadness. We carry the inconsolable longing for More.

Glorious ruin is a story about life and the world. It is realistic and explains the loneliness that snakes through us. But it's not enough, is it? And it's not all there is. I know that it was a wonder to me to marry into a family that was always imagining future possibilities for houses and land. Remodeling. Shaping. Beautifying. Houses are like your life: you work on them. You fight against decay and weather in the passion to create something more beautiful than you started with. Marrying into the Daniel family was like getting the other half of the gospel. Yes, things fall apart. Yes, much that is beautiful is lost. But that's not the end of it. God is in the restoration business. The Triune God's mission is making old things new again. And he calls us into that work, whether it's gardens or people, neighborhoods or families.

This is what I think Charles Wesley was after in these seldom sung verses from "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Look at this prayer:

Now display thy saving power,  
Ruined nature now restore.

Wesley believed the Christmas story has everything to do with restoring ruins. His hope is vast. You can certainly hear the longing for fixing the whole creation. Ruined nature, with its brutal cycles of birth and death, the violence in the wilds, the upheavals of hurricanes and earthquakes needs to be brought back into harmony. Yet, the most intense focus here is on the nature of humanity. It is my ruined nature that needs restoration. We each need to be remade from the inside out. *Now display thy saving power/Ruined nature now restore.*

This is the astounding hope in the Christian view of the world. We have a story of what is old being made new, of what is broken getting fixed, of what is

ruined being made more glorious than it had ever been even in the beginning. Our story can be told in so many different ways, but the core of it remains the same. Each time this story is unfolded in a life, it fits the unique person. Yet there is a consistent pattern of our story in all of those individual stories. Here's one way true way that's just a sentence long: *Jesus came all the way down so that we might be lifted all the way up.* Jesus came to where we are so that we could live where he does: in loving communion with the Father. He came from the perfection of the heavenly realm to restore the ruin of the earthly realm. We use the picture of a journey from one place to another. But Jesus' physical arrival in our world created for us first a *spiritual* arrival of us in his world. His relational world. His life of love in the Triune God.

It's the greatest story of search and rescue. It's the true hero's tale of leaving home on a quest and returning with the prize. That's the startling news: we, lost and frail, broken and falling into ruin are the pearl of great price to our God. His hero's journey to the far country was coming here, to where human beings live in ragged exile. He came to ransom us from captivity. He came to scoop us up in his arms. He came to make the fountains flow again and return to us the wonder of that little girl on the edge of the pool. He came to liberate us and bring us to the realm of freedom and life and light. Along that quest, he braved perils, he slew the beast, he endured suffering and came out, beyond hope, victorious. Jesus came all the way down so that we might be lifted all the way up.

That's a story by which you can live your life in confidence. It assuages the deep longing for lost beauty. And it's story that energizes us with purpose. Because we learn that his great quest continues. Only now he sends us to be heroes on the search and rescue mission to bring others home. He sends us to be part of his renovating work in the world. Jesus still does the saving and the restoring. We just get to be his partners in quest. It is the mighty hero journey of love. He came down to gather us up, and he is still doing it.

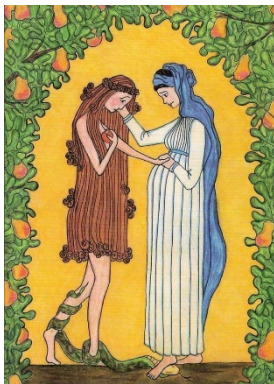
Paul put it this way, "He died for all that those who live might no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." (I Cor. 5: 15). He came down into the ruined world of death to enter our dying. He went under the waters of death where we all drown. But he came up alive again. And it was all for our sake. He died and rose to free us from living for ourselves and dying by ourselves. His new life in us frees us to live for him, and that change from self focus to Christ focus renovates the whole house of our lives.

Let's look at one more startling phrase from "Hark the Herald" that helps us think about this. Wesley writes,

Rise, the woman's conquering seed,  
Bruise in us the serpent's head.

Here Wesley is reaching all the way back to Genesis 3, to the first promise of the ultimate redemption God has for us. To understand the promise, we have to reckon with the heap of trouble humanity has been in. The Bible tells the story of a loving God creating a good earth. He made human beings for a life of communion with God, love with one another, and loving dominion over the earth. Our first home was a Garden, given to us to tend and till in love. But we fell from such grace. We chose against the LORD. Our good nature was ruined. Death entered the world and creation became disordered. Ever since we have been in bondage to decay, subjected to the futility of living and striving only to see it all fall apart.

There's no more realistic view of the human predicament than Christianity. We don't pretend we are better than we are. We boldly admit: our nature is ruined. We're in a mess. We are cut off from the God we long for. We miss him so badly that sometimes it feels like we just hate him. Our relationships are disordered. We hurt most the ones we love the most. We have a dream of how life should be but can't ever get there. We are a wreck and a ruin.



In Genesis 3, we read the first promise of restoration. The LORD spoke to the serpent who had tempted Adam and Eve after they had eaten the forbidden fruit. He said, "Because you have done this, cursed are you...on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel (Genesis 3: 14-15).

Amidst the death sentence we had earned, the LORD God offered a glimmer of a great hope. We would be cursed with our ruined nature, but God would not be deprived of his ultimate goal to be in communion with us. For centuries, Christian commentators have seen in Genesis 3 a promise of the Christ. An offspring of Eve would lift the curse and crush the evil one. In this lovely image, we see Eve meeting Mary. Eve places her hand against Mary to feel in her womb the Christ child. A serpent has slithered from Eve's leg towards Mary. But Mary has

stomped on its head, the preview of what her Son would accomplish. The Seed, or Offspring, of Eve was the eternal Son of God born of the Virgin's womb. This seed of Eve, her offspring, would all his life be in deadly combat with the serpent. The serpent would strike the a dire blow, a blow like a cross. But the Seed of Eve would strike a killing blow upon the serpent. "He will bruise your head." This blow would be unto everlasting defeat. Though the serpent had tempted us into ruin, the Offspring of Eve would slay the serpent and restore our ruined nature.

Jesus, born at Christmas, accomplished this victory in his life, death, resurrection and glorious ascension. He bruised the head of the serpent. He restored the ruined nature of lost humanity to communion with God. He opened up heaven to us.

But Wesley knew what we know. This side of heaven, the struggle is not over. We look to Jesus and we are saved. But the old nature, the ruined Man is still inside us. So in Advent, as we celebrate God's arrival in the baby Jesus, we also cry out for him to come to each of us. We pray that he would work in our hearts. "Rise, the woman's conquering Seed/Bruise in *us* the serpent's head." Promised Savior, conquering king, come slay the serpent inside us. Rise up Jesus and smash the evil nature of my old life. As Wesley wrote elsewhere, "Take away our bent to sinning." Lord, make me new again.

A story of dry fountains and a broken girl on the edge of a cracked pool sings within us. We feel the sadness of the ruin in the world. We feel the downward drag of death in all we do. It's very easy to believe that what is lost can never be restored. I grew up under the power of that story. But the Gospel tells a better story. The Offspring of Eve has come. He has conquered the evil one who wields the power of deathliness. Life wins. Jesus the second Adam has recreated our humanity. He has established a new human nature, one turned back towards God, scrubbed free of sin and eager to partake of Christ's beauty. So Wesley prays at the end of this verse that Christ, would "now in mystic union join" your nature to our nature. Join our lives to your life. And sign us up for the great reclamation project of the gospel, that we might join you in telling the world a better story.