

Journey to Redemption

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The redeemed of the Lord shall say so¹

John Stone

For my friend Daniel Hershberger

This article recounts a vision of journeying into heaven. The vision is a revelation of God's redemption. The introduction and conclusion sum up what I have, since the vision, learned about God's redemption. May the Lord Jesus Christ bless you richly as you read.

¹ Psalm 107:2

Introduction

As One Speaks to A Friend

*Your redemption draws near*²

My teachers taught me that redemption means God's grace returning man to his former state. Redemption, I was told, meant man rekindling his relationship with God. In a phrase, redemption meant getting back to the Garden of Eden. And I believed it. But I was half-wrong and my good teachers were half-right.

Redemption means more than walking with God just in the cool of the day. Redemption means walking with God always everywhere.³ The Bible alludes to this amazing reality. Until now that reality was hidden from my eyes.⁴ But now I am seeing it. So before we get to the heavenly vision, let me show you some of what I am seeing.⁵

Redemption is like Jacob the thief running away from home with nothing but a walking stick and then returning home twenty years later a wizened man with a great name, a generous heart, married with 11 children and wealthy with herds of livestock.⁶ When Jacob was redeemed, he saw "*God face to face.*"⁷ Redemption is like that.

Redemption is also like the story of a few Israelites, 70 in all, going down to Egypt as welcomed guests only to be enslaved by their hosts.⁸ When God redeemed the Israelites, He multiplied the 70 into 2,000,000 souls heading home with their captors' wealth piled high in carts.⁹ Then God destroyed the Egyptians in the sea so that the redeemed would never see those bad guys again.¹⁰ To cap it off, to the foremost of those redeemed people, to Moses, the one-time murderer who had to flee for his life, the Lord spoke "*face to face, as one speaks to a friend.*"¹¹ Redemption is also like that.¹²

Redemption is like being a wealthy herdsman under the law of Moses and having all your oxen and sheep stolen, and then lo-and-behold! the thief is caught and the judge declares, "*the thief must pay back five oxen for each ox stolen, and four sheep for each sheep stolen.*"¹³ The settlement for being robbed in ancient Israel did not just restore your purloined property, it multiplied your original wealth into a heaping sum. Redemption is like that too.¹⁴

Redemption is like what God did in return for Satan murdering Stephen. The story goes that Satan used Saul to snuff out Stephen's life and end his ministry, a ministry that included handing out food to widows.¹⁵ So to redeem Stephen's life and ministry, God turned Satan's murderous tool, Saul, into the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul penned half the New Testament and in his day he spread Christianity across the civilized world,

² Luke 21:28 NASB

³ Genesis 3:8; Colossians 3:3

⁴ Matthew 11:25

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:9

⁶ Genesis 32:10, 32:22

⁷ Genesis 32

⁸ Genesis 46:27; Exodus 1:8-11

⁹ Exodus 12:35-38

¹⁰ Exodus 14:13-14

¹¹ Exodus 33:11

¹² Hebrews 4:6; Ephesians 2:18-19; Colossians 2:6; Zechariah 3:7

¹³ Exodus 22:1

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:21-23

¹⁵ Acts 6:2-5; Acts 7:58

providing heavenly manna to millions.¹⁶ Not only did the martyr Stephen “*see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!*” but because of God’s redemption, the Apostle Paul “*was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell.*”¹⁷ Redemption is like that.¹⁸

Redemption is also like the Apostle John being exiled to the rock-strewn isle of Patmos because he could not cease preaching the Gospel, only to be caught up from there in the Spirit where he “*saw a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it ... as brilliant as gemstones, like jasper and carnelian. And the glow of an emerald circled his throne like a rainbow.*”¹⁹ Redemption is like that, and redemption is like this story too.²⁰

¹⁶ Acts 9:1-22

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 12:4

¹⁸ Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁹ Revelation 1:9 and 4:2-3

²⁰ 1 John 3:2

Traveling from the Garden to God

He told them to take nothing for their journey except a walking stick²¹

The path through the woods ended at an iron gate. Beyond the gate lay a garden. I stood looking into the garden, holding firmly onto my walking stick. The garden gave off a different feeling than I had felt before. It felt safe. Sensing no danger, I tried the gate. It opened and I entered. The iron gate swung closed behind me.

There had been perils along the path through the woods. Along the path I had tangled with more than one danger. False trails led off the path and threats in the woods abounded. But unlike the wild woods behind me, the garden in front felt safe. It seemed cared for. The trees and bushes looked purposely planted. The grounds seemed tended. In the open spaces, the grass was green and thick. The air felt light and fresh, not like the heaviness hanging throughout the woods. In the garden was an atmosphere of benevolence, of sunshine and hope.

I walked a few steps into the garden and pushed a small branch out of the apparent way forward. The way sloped upwards. I walked deeper into the garden and out of sight of the iron gate. I left the dark woods behind. Not far into the garden I stepped around a bend. There before me stood the most unique tree.

The tree was full of buds and blooms. It was laden with fruits of various colors and shapes. A breeze enlivened the tree. The breeze swirled in the tree's limbs and the breeze blew up and down the tree's trunk. The leaves danced in the breeze. Every limb of the tree reached upwards like the arms of a man praising God.

I smelled jasmine. I wondered if the aroma was carried on the breeze that enlivened the tree or if the perfume came from an unseen source.

I smelled the jasmine again and for some reason the smell made me remember how hungry I was. The hanging fruit was tempting but I did not want to eat anything poisonous. "All that glitters is not gold," I reminded my stomach. Better to remain hungry than to become sick and maybe die.

This tree looked like it belonged here in the garden, like it was normal and safe, but at the same time it was so different and alive compared to the rest of the garden. But oh! I was hungry. My stomach growled and the fruit looked delicious. I was salivating.

I followed safety protocol for eating unknown foods. One cluster of red fruits looked similar to pomegranates. After testing the red fruit, it seemed safe so I bit into it like one would bite into an apple. It was delectable. I ate more. The fruit made me feel better. I could see and hear better. The fruit energized me.

After finishing the 'pomegranate,' I picked a yellow and black fruit shaped somewhat like a banana. The yellow and black fruit tasted different than the pomegranate. I savored the new taste. My senses grew sharper. I decided that all the fruit on the tree was good to eat and picked a few different ones. I sat down on the grass beneath the tree. With my back comfortably against the tree trunk, I faced in the direction of the gate to see if anyone else might come, be they friend or foe. None did. I was alone. I had been traveling alone a long time.

Resting beneath the tree, I enjoyed the different fruits one bite at a time. It had been a hike through the woods, many days and nights, and this was the first satisfying food I had tasted since beginning my journey. While still alert for danger, I enjoyed the time of rest and refreshment.

²¹ Mark 6:8

I had walked alone through the woods, and now I was alone in the garden, alone beneath this one-of-a-kind tree. I could have sat there eating fruit and enjoying the beauty and solitude of the garden a long time. It was peaceful and I considered staying. But now that I was refreshed, I thought about going further even if it meant going on alone.

I looked over my left shoulder, deeper into the garden and further up the pathway. It was time to get going. Further in and further up was the way to go. So I stood up and began walking further in and further up. As I started walking, I began preparing my mind for a hike. Having the right mindset helped me keep a healthier attitude and better respond to surprises. My journey had been full of surprises. Too many times I had responded poorly because I had not kept ready.

As I was setting my mind aright, twenty or thirty steps away from the tree, I pushed aside a small limb and stumbled once more upon something unexpected. A golden escalator. I was astonished. How could that be here, I wondered. Maybe the escalator was a diversion, something unreal to take my eyes away from a threat. I looked around the garden for danger but could detect none. The atmosphere still felt safe so my eyes went back to the wonder in front of me.

By my calculations and probably by anybody else's, that escalator was out of place in this garden. I looked again for a trap but peace was the order of the day. I was safe. And there in front of me stood, of all things, a golden escalator. The steps of the escalator moved one way. That way was up.

Like the mysterious fruit tree, the escalator was other-worldly. I was intrigued. Watching the steps rise up and out of sight, one step after another steadily rising upwards, I wondered who back home would believe me if I told them that on the other end of the dark woods was a peaceful garden, and in the garden was a wondrous tree, and a little further past the tree was a golden escalator going up, probably going up to heaven.

My best friends would want to believe me but even those who had loved me the longest would need to see this for themselves. From here it was impossible for me to get a message back to them. They would have to find this place on their own. I closed and opened my eyes. I was having difficulty believing myself. My eyes showed me the truth yet my mind could not fully comprehend the vision. If I could not believe all that I was seeing, how could those left behind believe some part thereof?

Minutes passed as I stood there thinking, staring blindly at the escalator, trying to pull all I had seen together into some logical story. I reconsidered the wonders of the garden. I recounted the difficult journey through the woods. I remembered the day I left my friends back home and struck out on the path into the woods. I could not make sense of everything that had happened since then. The sum of my experiences was more than my mind could tally. The difference between home and here was like night and day. And to put the icing on the cake, in front of me was a golden escalator probably going up to heaven, and to get to heaven all I had to do was walk onto the bottommost step and ride. It was not just my environment that had changed. I had changed too.

Along the path through the woods, I lost everything I started with. The only things that remained the same from the beginning were my name and this walking stick. I looked at the old stick that I held in my right hand. It was like an old friend. It had kept me from slipping and I had used it for defense. I leaned on the walking stick in more ways than one. Maybe my walking stick was like God's rod. I had felt God's rod of discipline when I wandered off the path. And like God's staff, maybe this walking stick was also symbolic of God's presence. Considering where I was and who I had become, I realized that the lost things were of no value here. Like square pegs in round holes, those things would never fit in here. I wondered if a man could pass the garden's gate with them. I kept thinking about my travels.

In my mind's eye I was seeing the story of my journey. But trying to assimilate what I was seeing into a neat little package was tangling up my mind. The more I tried to make sense of my journey, the deeper I dug myself into a mental hole. Much of my journey could not be explained, and the parts that I could explain could not be connected.

It was like I left home on a treasure hunt but had misunderstood the rules of the hunt. It seemed that the treasure I sought externally was being created internally as I hunted. It also seemed that no matter how far afield I searched for treasure, I kept finding little treasures that seemed to mark the way to *the* treasure. The little treasures encouraged me to press on.

I had been journeying for 30 years but even one year of the trek was too much for me to make sense of. A man's life should not exceed his own intellect, I thought, unless man is not foremost an intellectual being. Maybe I was a primarily a spiritual being. Whatever I was, I needed to press on.

But I could not press on while stuck in this hole even if it was a mental hole. My best thoughts kept me locked in turmoil. My powers of logic were powerless to free me. My trek had ground to a halt. Then, like hearing a new birdsong, I thought an altogether new thought. Maybe I did not need logic to go further. Maybe in the garden trying to explain my life was a trap. Maybe here in the garden, intellectual power was no power at all. Maybe to continue the journey I needed to set aside the intellect that seemed to have served me so well until now.

I decided to be still and wait. What else could I do? I was stuck. God would have to give to me and keep for me what I could neither give nor keep myself. Until God did what only God could do, I could not continue. I was stuck. Standing there in front of the escalator with its steps rhythmically rising into heaven, I leaned on my walking stick. I closed my eyes. I encouraged myself with the thought that God is faithful to those who are faithful. I stood and I waited. I rested on my staff. I think I dozed off. Maybe I was dreaming.

Maybe I was imagining. From deep in the garden came a breeze so light that if I had been moving I would not have felt it. The breeze carried a sweetness that hinted of jasmine. In my half-asleep state, I listened. With my heart, I leaned into the breeze. The breeze was more than just the wind. The breeze was like a song. Maybe I was dreaming but it seemed to my heart that someone somewhere was singing. I could hear Him now, the Gardener singing in His garden. I could make out His words. He was singing, "My peace I give to you, my peace I leave with you. Not as the world gives, do I give to you."

My heart sighed yes to the breeze and yes to the song and yes to the peace that was floating over me and trying to flow into me, and the Gardener's song of peace came into me. I never saw the Gardener. But not far from me I knew He was singing over me. Waking from my dream, if it was a dream, I kept my eyes closed. I kept still. I kept leaning on my walking stick while peace flowed into my heart.

Renewed with peace, I chose to accept things as they were even if they could not be explained. With the Gardener's peace, this was easy to do. "Let God be God and you press on," I told myself with a smile and then added, "You don't have to understand to believe." Thinking was easy now. My mind was at peace. Now that I had peace, I pressed on.

The golden steps rising up out of sight invited me for an adventure, an adventure into the unknown above. Before saying yes and stepping onto the bottom step of the escalator, I thought back over my journey one last time, easily accepting what could be understood and letting peace like a river flow over the unexplainable.

With peace, I remembered my friends. I thought about how far I had journeyed alone. None back home would believe what I had experienced or understand the distance I traveled. They would not know how I had been changed. I was the same man as when I left but I had become a different person. I had lost and gained and lost and gained, and changed and changed again until I was altogether different than when I began. The

journey did that to me. It changed me. There would be time sometime to remember it all but that time was not now. I needed to move on. I was refreshed. It was time to go. And here in the garden was an escalator calling me higher, inviting me into wonders above.

My eyes followed the rising steps to where they disappeared into the light above. Maybe this was how the character Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress* felt when he beheld the gateway to the Celestial City. Maybe the book's author, John Bunyan, had been this way before. Maybe I would catch up with him somewhere up there, and we would sit and talk when it was time to remember.

The golden steps kept rising out of sight, inviting me higher. Time to go, I told myself. Onward and upward, I said like a soldier. With my walking stick firmly in hand, I marched forward smiling, giving myself an 'atta-boy!' for moving peacefully into the unknown above. I stepped onto the bottom most step. The escalator carried me to another level.

I stepped off the escalator into white light. Standing in the light, I knew intuitively that this level went on forever, that a man could spend a lifetime exploring this light and never come to its end. Within the light were endless treasures waiting to be searched out. As I gazed into the light I also knew that men who had come before me were busy exploring this level. Many adventurers arrived before I showed up. To follow them and share in their exploration would be an honor, but I had a feeling that if I turned left and walked behind me a bit, I might find another escalator going even higher. I turned and walked. I wanted to go higher.

As soon as I started walking I noticed that my walking stick was gone. I never felt it leave my hand. I had it when I stepped onto the escalator. Where the thing disappeared to, I never discovered. Not that I looked much for it. I think I lost it on the escalator. When I realized the old stick was gone, vanished, I thought that maybe like the other things I had lost along the way, it too was no longer needed. Surprisingly I was unfazed over the loss. The stick had been with me for 30 years but losing it now did not seem to matter. Here in the light there was no danger of falling or losing my way. Any direction I wanted to travel was good. Nothing here was dangerous. In every direction lay a joyful adventure. The old walking stick had vanished and I was okay.

I kept walking. Each step I took was easy and peaceful. I really had no need for the extra balance a walking stick could provide. A few steps more and I came upon a huge stone. The stone sat on the ground and rose as high as my waist. The stone was as big as an Ebenezer stone, a stone of remembrance. I squatted down to examine it.

The stone was green and full of life. Inside the stone, pictures appeared and disappeared, and words came and went. As I watched, I realized that like a movie in a theatre, a story was being told inside the stone. The story in the stone revolved around Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of our faith. A faint sound was coming from the stone. I placed my hands on the stone and felt the vibrations of a song emanating from inside. This stone was an eternal treasure, a revelation or series of revelations hidden by God for those who would pay the price to find it and take the time to study it.

I made a few mental notes about the green stone but that was it. I was not stopping to study this or any other treasure no matter how valuable such an effort might prove to be. I was moving on. My goal was to go as far as I could go. That was what my heart wanted. On I walked into the white light, hoping to find another escalator going up. I wanted to go higher. I wanted to go all the way.

My initial sense of a second escalator had been right. There was a second one. Eight or ten steps further into the light, not far past the green stone, I found it. With all the white light, I almost bumped into it. From what I could see of it, this escalator looked like the first. Its golden steps rose upwards, inviting me higher. In the bright light, I could not see how high the steps rose. They rose out of sight.

When I stepped off the second escalator, I was two levels above the garden. Like the level below with the green stone, this second level was filled with white light and it too went on forever. Also like the first level, I knew that adventurous men were here exploring and finding endless treasures. The difference between this level and the one below was that the glories one could find here were a degree higher than the treasures one could find just below. Those who went higher found higher treasures. I suspected that if I turned to my left and again walked behind me nine or ten steps, I might find another escalator going even higher. I was right. I was right seven times. A total of eight golden escalators carried me eight levels above the garden and the wondrous tree.

I stepped off the eighth and last escalator into a crystal-clear atmosphere. As far as I could see, green grass covered low rolling hills and blue sky stretched above. The pure blue sky touched the horizon all around. One could walk in any direction forever. I breathed deeply. The cleanest air filled my lungs and I sensed that the air in my lungs made my eyes sparkle. It felt like a great day on the American prairie but infinitely better. I knew that there were treasures to find out there on the grasslands, over the hills beyond, and like on the levels below, adventurous men before me had found their way here and were out there exploring and finding timeless riches. While men were out there over the hills, I remained alone. I had been alone the entire journey. I gazed up.

Looking up and smiling, I pointed my index finger upwards. Smiling, I announced to no one, "Up there is the throne of God." Then my arm went down to my side and I rose into the air, up through the blue sky until I could no longer see the green hills below. Not that I was looking down. I was looking up. I was going higher. I was going as far as I could go. I stopped rising in front of a silvery cloud.

Streaks of fire raced in the edges of the cloud and colorful lights appeared and disappeared into it. I could only see a foot or two into the silver cloud. The flashes of fire and zipping lights seemed to be signals or communications of some sort but I had no idea what any of them meant. I looked around and was glad to see what I saw. I had been alone for so long.

Beside me, above and below me stood men and women and children and angels. Five or eight were more or less above me and about the same number below, not that any of us were 'above' or 'below' another. Thousands upon thousands of people and angels stretched out to my right and left. We all faced the cloud, surrounding it in a band. We knew that God's throne was inside the cloud. None of us could see God but we knew that He sat inside the silvery cloud, and we knew we surrounded Him. We were overjoyed to be so near to God. We spontaneously started singing His praises.

Everyone sang a different song of praise but our many songs blended together into one beautiful song. Every voice was unique but there remained harmony among the thousands. I had never heard such a splendid sound in my life.

As our great song of praise intensified, the whole band of people and angels began circling the cloud in a unity of movement. As the praises increased, the circling motion increased in speed. When it seemed like we could praise God no more intensely or circle the cloud any faster, some of the people began moving into the silvery cloud. These people were drawing closer to God. The angels did not enter the cloud. The angels could not draw any nearer to God than they were. Some people remained with the angels.

As we moved into the cloud, people stopped at different distances from God. A few stopped near the edge of the cloud, some went further in and some went all the way. It seemed that a person's past choices related to how near to God they could now draw.

As I moved near the center of the silvery cloud, the atmosphere cleared and I found myself standing outside a golden fire. The golden fire was energy of some sort. Traces of fire and lights were streaking through the

energy, going in every direction all at once. I knew that inside the golden fire was the throne of God. I gazed into the fire but could see nothing but the streaking pulses of light. Then suddenly the fire cleared and I could see inside. I saw God seated on His throne. I could see His outline. His outline looked like a big man seated on a big chair. Nothing special, just a big man seated on a big chair in the midst of a golden fire. As I gazed at God, He waved his right hand at me, beckoning me to come into the fire to Him. I shook my head no.

I had no business being that close to God, I told myself, until another thought followed on that thought's heels. My follow up thought said I was being exceedingly arrogant to disobey the King of the universe, so I obeyed. I walked into the fire, drawing ever closer to God.

What transpired when I walked up to God's throne was beyond what any man could ask for or imagine.²² For now suffice it to read the Lord Jesus' promise recorded in Luke 12:32: *"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom."*

²² Ephesians 3:20

Conclusion

New Life

*The old life is gone; a new life has begun!*²³

The words ‘deem’ and ‘redeem,’ per the dictionary, are unrelated. But when talking about God’s redemption these dissimilar words are kissing-cousins. When it comes to God’s redemption, ‘deem’ *is* the root word of ‘redeem.’ Here is what I mean. In the dictionary, ‘redeem’ means to buy back or to set free by paying a ransom, while ‘deem’ means to judge or to consider. We all understand the word ‘redeem,’ but ‘deem’ might be a bit tricky. ‘Deem’ means to declare the nature of something or someone. We might think about ‘deem’ this way:

When a king ‘deems’ one of his subjects, the king raises his scepter, points it at the person and then decrees or pronounces that person to possess a specific nature. For example, a king might raise his scepter and *deem* a man to be a knight. And so the man is a knight. Before the king *deemed* the man, there may have been some question among the people as to that man’s true nature, but the king’s decree brings an end to all debate. The man is what the king says he is. Even if the ‘deemed’ person thinks of himself as something different than a knight, no matter. The king ‘deemed’ him a knight so he is a knight. End of discussion. Which brings us to the salient point.

When the King of kings, Jesus Christ, redeems a man, first He pays the man’s ransom. The King buys the man back from death. Then second, the King ‘*deems*’ the man anew. In other words, after giving the man new life, King Jesus then gives the man a greater purpose and destiny than he had before he went into captivity. When the King Jesus redeems a man, He *deems* the man entirely new. King Jesus *re---deems* him. When a man is *re---deemed*, he receives a second place in the King’s kingdom that is far better than the first place the man forfeited.

After man forfeited life in the Garden, God did what only God can do. God *deemed* man a second time. In other words, God *re---deemed* man.

For the *re---deemed* man, salvation is just the beginning. Eternal life is only the start. Being *re---deemed* means receiving an entirely new nature, a nature far exceeding the unfallen nature of Adam and Eve. When a man is *re---deemed*, God appoints him to more than just life in old Eden. Life in old Eden is only his start.

When God *re---deems*, God drops a ladder down from heaven to the Garden so that the repentant man may climb the ladder to its top and walk with Him always everywhere. When a man is *re---deemed*, it is more than true that his “*old life is gone; a new life has begun!*”²⁴ Being *re---deemed* is a mystery of our faith but being a mystery does not lessen its awesomeness.²⁵ It just means that there is always more of it to discover. What you read here about redemption is only the beginning.

And here is another mystery. If man’s life in the Garden of Eden had not been lost, if man had not sinned and fallen short of God’s glory, then the King of glory could not have opened the way that leads closer to Him than Adam and Eve ever dreamed.²⁶ The Lord Jesus Christ *re---deemed* us for more than many well-meaning teachers have told. The Lord Jesus *re---deemed* us not just with an unfallen nature, He *re---deemed* us

²³ 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT

²⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:17

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:7

²⁶ Romans 3:23; James 4:8; John 14:6

with a godly nature. He *re---deemed* us into His very nature. The opportunity to meet with God face-to-face just as Jacob and Moses and Paul did, is also offered to you.²⁷ *For God does not show favoritism.*²⁸

Like the heroes of the faith who met God face-to-face in this world in this life, you too can journey so far into your *re---deemed* nature that you can find yourself dwelling in heaven alongside the Lord Jesus while your body yet walks in this world.

How far into your *re---deemed* nature will you go?

²⁷ Acts 10:34

²⁸ Romans 2:11 NLT