

Coming Home

Another Perspective on Salvation in Christ

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The “Rescue” Paradigm

In *Christ and the End of Meaning* (1993), Paul Hessert¹ begins by discussing the “myths,” or stories about life into which we fit our experiences so that they have meaning for us. Many such paradigms exist, but a prominent one in Western culture is the Rescue paradigm, epitomized by the “cowboy Western.” Someone, or perhaps a community, is in trouble or danger from an enemy; but a hero arrives from outside to fight that enemy and delivers the “victims” from whatever, or whomever, is oppressing them.

Christians, reading the Gospel story of Jesus Christ, often interpret it—that is, receive its “meaning”—from the Rescue paradigm. Humanity is oppressed by enemies: illness, poverty, strife between opposing forces, and above all “sin” (self-centered rebellion against God and His ways) and sin’s instigator, Satan or the devil. The difficulty of the Rescue theme arises when, somehow, the problems don’t get resolved. Healing fails to occur, for example, or sinful behavior in ourselves or others doesn’t get rectified—and death, “the last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15:26), refuses to release its grip on human life. Christians try to retain the Rescue paradigm by changing its meaning: Christ’s rescue is understood as opening the way to life after death. Even though earthly existence continues to be harsh, those who are “saved” through trust in Christ are assured of “going to heaven,” our true home. But, quite obviously, this is a different twist on the Rescue motif; no “cowboy Western” would succeed at the box office if it were scripted in this manner.

The “Coming Home” Motif

There is another “myth,” or interpretive motif, one Hessert doesn’t list, that might allow us to experience the Gospel story in a more meaningful way: the paradigm of Coming Home. “Homecoming” stories are common in world literature, but the Biblical narrative is a supreme example of a story framed around the theme of our loss of Home and our return to it. The account opens with a picture of Eden, the place of harmony and peace where “the tree of life” flourishes. Here God walks in intimate communication with the man and woman He made “in His image,” His agents in the management of His creation (Genesis 1–3). And the Biblical account ends with that Home restored in “a new heaven and a new earth,” as God’s city comes down out of heaven, the venue where “the dwelling of God is with men,” where “the tree of life” flourishes once again, where sorrow and death oppress no more (Revelation 21–22).

Between these opening and closing visions the Biblical narrative chronicles the saga of the loss of Home and what God has done to restore us to it. We lost Eden when Adam and Eve were expelled because they refused to acknowledge Who was the true head of their Home, and listened to another voice that said, “You don’t need God; you are your own god, your own authority.” Human affairs continued to yield to that voice, to the point that mankind, in a futile search for its lost Home, even presumed to build “a tower with its top in the heavens” (Genesis 11:4-6), thus rendering God irrelevant. His answer was to summon one people, out of many, to begin the process of restoring the lost Eden even within a world ruled by godlessness. He called Abraham to throw off the false paradigm of Babel and go forth in search of the place God would show him, “the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:10). In Abraham and his descendants, all people were to be blessed—in effect, to Come Home to God.

Exiled from Home

The Israelites, after a period of slavery in Egypt, believed they had Come Home when they were settled in Canaan, the land the Lord had promised them. But they fell into homelessness once again when they listened to that insidious voice and turned away from the Lord. From exile—back in Babylon, or Babel, once again—they returned to the land of promise but found themselves still “in exile” through the continual domination of pagan foreign powers. In response they mistook the call of their ancestor Abraham as an elevation to privileged status in God, rather than a call to mission to all peoples. Through their liberator Moses, who had brought them out of Egyptian slavery, the Lord had taught the Israelites a just way of life in the promised land, but they made that teaching (the Law) into a barrier to separate themselves from others. Instead of realizing how God had called them to be part of the *solution* for

homelessness, Israel had made itself part of the *problem*. Babel was repeating itself, only now it was Israel who was building the tower.

Sacrifice and Homecoming

Coming Home, indeed, requires a sacrifice, one that Adam and Eve and those who follow them in their exile from Eden are unwilling to make. It is the sacrifice of giving up one's self-centered efforts to build our own home, and our attempts to force others to conform to our ideas about how it should operate. Our idea of "truth," in fact, may be the greatest obstacle to returning to Eden. In her novel *The Bird in the Tree* (1940), Elizabeth Goudge² builds the narrative around the conflict between self-fulfillment, falsely understood, and Coming Home. David Eliot is to inherit the family home, where he grew up, from his grandmother. However, he has fallen in love with Nadine, his Uncle George's divorced wife who is only a few years older than David. David knows he must renounce his claim to the family home if, through marriage to Nadine, he disrupts the family unity and becomes the resented stepfather to his own young cousins. In order to "come home" he must sacrifice the false "truth" of his love for Nadine, who makes the same sacrifice in order to return to David's uncle. (The story sees further resolutions in two subsequent novels by Elizabeth Goudge.)

Homelessness has become an issue in contemporary American culture. Politically, for example, advocates for the homeless want the U.S. Census to count, by estimate, homeless people even if no address is given for them. However, some authorities have stated that the majority of "homeless" people do have a place to go home to if they were willing to give up behavior patterns or addictions that make them unwelcome, or attitudes that keep them from wanting to live with others who are there. Again, Going Home may require sacrifice—letting go of something that we identify as "the truth about me" that constitutes a barrier between me and other members of the home and family to which I could belong.

"Coming Home" through Jesus

God's plan to bring His human family home to Himself, then, had to involve a sacrifice. Israel, the community He had commissioned to lead the way home, was itself estranged, still in exile, and needed to be restored to the family. This is what Jesus of Nazareth understood about His people, and why He came announcing that "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). The Father was on the move again, reconstituting the family of Abraham to complete the mission to which the Lord had called them. But Jesus made no secret of the sacrifice required in Coming Home. He told a story about a son who—like Elizabeth Goudge's David Eliot—had left his home to pursue his own course of life but who "came to himself," realized the bankruptcy and despair of the way he had chosen, and returned in humility to a forgiving father. The son's elder brother resented the extravagant welcome given the returning prodigal, and thus made himself "homeless" despite his father's tender plea to share in the family's joy (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus sorrowed when a wealthy young man turned away from following the kingdom of God because of his preoccupation with his possessions, those things that made up his supposed identity (Mark 10:16-22).

Above all, Jesus knew that He, Himself—the Bearer of the Father's appeal to Come Home—would pay the price of rejection and death. Such a sacrifice was required, the sacrifice of the faithful Israelite, to bring about the reconciliation of the Father and his errant family. Thus Jesus encapsulates the story of the people of Israel in Himself. Like them, in His earthly course He is homeless: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). Yet He has a home with the Father, whence He has come (John 1:14) and to which, having made the sacrifice in behalf of His people, He will return (John 16:10). His teachings abound with expressions of the price He must pay, in the role of the rejected Servant foreseen by the prophet Isaiah who must bear the sins and sorrows of His people (Isaiah 53:3-6). "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45), so they could return Home from their captivity. Jesus lays down His life in order to take it up again in behalf of those who belong to Him (John 10:17-18). In laying down His life, Jesus "goes to the Father" (John 16:10) to make ready the Home to which His people will return. "And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 13:3).

That "place," as other passages of the New Testament make clear, is not a far-off realm but an abiding, or dwelling, with God in the midst of present conditions; those who are "in Christ" already participate in

the life of the restored creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; John 3:36; 1 John 5:11). It is not that we *go home* to some other place, but that we *Come Home* to Jesus, who in His resurrection—as “the last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45)—has opened the door into the restored Eden. The mission of Israel is renewed in the gospel, or the message of Christ; Paul speaks of this restored Abrahamic mission in terms of the promise of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:14-15), who is (in some sense) the experienced presence of the Lord Jesus Himself (2 Corinthians 3:17). The church, as “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27), is the embodiment of the new creation. But each individual who has “faithed” Christ—entered into His death, symbolized outwardly by baptism—is a “temple,” or “dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:21-22). Thus a Christian believer has not only Come Home, he or she *is* a Home for the presence of God.

The New Testament’s use of the Coming Home motif, therefore, has its varied, though consistent, expressions; Jesus and the apostles put it differently in different contexts, but the thrust is always the restoration of the Creator’s human *family* to His presence and fellowship. The Coming Home paradigm is certainly not inconsistent with the Rescue motif. Jesus does come to rescue, or “save,” us from our sinful preoccupation with self that breeds the stress and anguish of earthly life. But He accomplishes this deliverance by taking us back to our Father’s house, the Home that is here now by the Holy Spirit, the “new Jerusalem” (Revelation 3:12) to which the author of Hebrews says we—as members of Jesus—have already come (Hebrews 12:22-24). In this new Jerusalem, the city that comes down out of heaven to envelop us right where we are, we find ourselves raised up to sit with Christ “in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 2:6) and at Home in the Paradise of God’s presence.

¹Paul Hessert, *Christ and the End of Meaning: The Theology of Passion* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1993). The late Dr. Hessert was a professor at Illinois Wesleyan University during my student days there, and later served as Professor of Systematic Theology at Garrett Theological Seminary.

²Elizabeth Goudge, *The Bird in the Tree* (London: Duckworth, 1940).