
“SEEING IS NOT BELIEVING”

FAITH AND SIGHT IN MACDONALD AND LEWIS

SR. MARIA CATHERINE TOON, O.P.

APRIL 25, 2017

THEO 595 DAUPHINAIS

C.S. Lewis cites George MacDonald as his chief instructor, and claims, “I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him.”¹ One of the phrases both authors use, and imaginatively illustrate in their stories hangs on the connection between faith and sight. “Seeing is not believing.”² MacDonald uses supernatural realities in what Lewis affectionately calls “the Curdie books,”³ and Lewis, himself, leans on these realities to sharpen the distinction between those who believe and those who will not. Sight corresponds with reality. For those who do not believe, sight can give them an opportunity to examine their conscience for conversion. Both authors emphasize that sight does not give birth to faith but faith, which is a gift, bolsters sight and leads to deeper self-knowledge and a new understanding of the truth.

In both *The Princess and the Goblin*, and its sequel *The Princess and Curdie*, George MacDonald illustrates that faith is given as a gift, and works through the faculty of sight. In each work it is the Princess Irene’s grandmother who teaches Irene that it is necessary to believe in her even though not all can see her. Irene discovers this when she asks, “How was it, grandmother, that I saw your beautiful lamp?” ‘When I please I can make the lamp shine through the walls—shine so strong that it melts them away from before the sight, and shows itself as you saw it. But, as I told you, it is not everybody can see it.’ ‘How is it that I can, then?’ ‘It is a gift born with you. And one day I hope everybody will have it.’ Irene demonstrates that she is able to see supernatural realities because she already possessed belief in them; the gift manifests what she already is willing to believe is true. Lewis’ work *Till We Have Faces* Psyche also seems

¹Clive Staples Lewis. “Preface.” *George MacDonald: An Anthology*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947, xxxii.

²Clive Staples Lewis. *Miracles* (New York: Collier, 1960), 1. Jane says, “Isn’t seeing believing?” in *That Hideous Strength*, Ch.9. MacDonald originates the phrase in *The Princess and the Goblin*.

³Clive Staples Lewis. *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 163. Referring to *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*.

to have an innate sense of truth that Orual cannot conceive of. "I am going, you see, to the Mountain. You remember how we used to look and long? And all the stories of my gold and amber house, up there against the sky, where we thought we should never really go? The greatest King of all was going to build it for me. If only you could believe it, Sister! No, listen. I am the one who has been made ready for it ever since I was a little child in your arms, Maia. The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing — to reach the Mountain, to find the place where all the beauty came from."⁴ Psyche articulates more specifically an inner sense that there is truth to her imaginative dreams from childhood. She sees her own sacrificial offering as a providential means to the fulfillment of her deepest desire. Seeing ratifies the faith that Psyche and Irene already possess.

To both MacDonald and Lewis, those who cannot see, lack faith. Not everyone is able to see the supernatural realities that are so plain to Irene and Psyche. Curdie, Irene's companion, needs more education in faith in the supernatural. As a result he is not as ready to see Irene's grandmother, who represents how the transcendent breaks through their reality. MacDonald writes, "He was standing in the middle of the floor, staring, and looking strangely bewildered.' Make a bow to my grandmother, Curdie,' she said. 'I don't see any grandmother,' answered Curdie rather gruffly. 'You're making game of me, Your Royal Highness; and after what we have come through together this day, I don't think it is kind of you,' said Curdie, feeling very much hurt."⁵ The Grandmother affirms, "Curdie is not yet able to believe some things. Seeing is not believing—it is only seeing."⁶ Curdie rejects the reality of Irene's grandmother because he

⁴ Clive Staples Lewis. *Till We Have Faces*. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1984, 75.

⁵ George MacDonald. *The Princess and the Goblin*. New York: Looking Glass Library, 2010, 182.

⁶ MacDonald, 185.

cannot see her. Sight cannot create faith for those who do not have it. The wise, old, Great-Great-Grandmother indicates MacDonald's belief that faith can be grown into with time, and that some are more capable of it than others.⁷ Similarly, Orual initially⁸ will not have faith in the vision that Psyche explains before her death, and will discard it as unnecessary for her relationship with Psyche. "'Aiai!' [Psyche] mourned, 'You can't see it. You can't feel it. For you, it is not there at all. Oh, Maia . . . I am very sorry.' I came almost to a full belief. I had not shaken her at all. She was as certain of her palace as of the plainest thing."⁹ Orual does not want to believe in what Psyche is able to see because it will change their relationship. Lewis develops how MacDonald articulates the connection between faith and sight. Orual's lack of belief will be the destruction of her false self, but the beginning of her resurrection in the truth. In order to make that transition, Orual unconsciously recognizes that there is some truth to Psyche's descriptions of her reality, but persists in rejecting it. Orual explains her own disbelief manifesting in her dreams when she says, "I knew, by the mere taste of them that all those dreams came from that moment when I believed I was looking at Psyche's palace and did not see it. For the horror was the same: a sickening discord, a rasping together of two worlds, like the two bits of a broken bone."¹⁰ Orual's lack of faith does not mean she is refusing to play a child's game: it means that she is sundering her understanding of the truth, a truth that she could share with Psyche. Psyche proves to be more capable of faith (at this point) and Orual deliberately

⁷ ' You remember I told you that if Lootie were to see me, she would rub her eyes, forget the half she saw, and call the other half nonsense.' (185) The grandmother compares Curdie and Lootie, Irene's nurse, who will not believe.

⁸ " And perhaps, Maia, you too will learn how to see. I will beg and implore him to make you able. He will understand." Psyche's prediction is fulfilled at the end of the story.

⁹ Lewis, 120.

¹⁰ Lewis, 120.

rejects faith and reality. Lewis takes MacDonald's view of those who lack faith and builds hope that those who do not will eventually be open to the truth.

Even for those who do have faith in supernatural realities, moments when they see gives them confidence to obey when they cannot see. For Irene, sight leads to a blind obedience and trust. "Irene looked at the ring. 'I can't see it there, grandmother,' she said. 'Feel—a little way from the ring—towards the cabinet,' said the lady. 'Oh! I do feel it!' exclaimed the princess. 'But I can't see it,' she added, looking close to her outstretched hand. 'No. The thread is too fine for you to see it. You can only feel it. Now listen. If ever you find yourself in any danger you must take off your ring and put it under the pillow of your bed. Then you must lay your finger, the same that wore the ring, upon the thread, and follow the thread wherever it leads you.'¹¹ The grandmother, whose abilities transcend nature, has built a trusting relationship with Irene, so that Irene knows that her grandmother's directions, although unusual, will prove to help her best in the end. It is Irene's obedience that saves Curdie from the goblins and brings them both home safely.¹² Likewise, Psyche's experience with the West Wind leads her to trust him and those of his household implicitly. "The spirits gave them to me. I couldn't see their hands. Yet, you know, it never looked as if the plates or the cup were moving of themselves. You could see that hands were doing it."¹³ About the god himself, Psyche says, "Oh, Orual, not even I have seen him — yet. He comes to me only in the holy darkness. He says I mustn't — not yet — see his face or know his name. I'm forbidden to bring any light into his — our — chamber."¹⁴ Even though she cannot see his face, Psyche trusts the West-Wind, her husband, even though she has lived in his

¹¹ MacDonald, 127.

¹² MacDonald, 177ff.

¹³ Lewis, 114.

¹⁴ Lewis, 123.

house for weeks without actually seeing him. Despite not physically seeing her husband, the joy is evidenced in her face,¹⁵ and the lack of sight does not impede her from being obedient to him. This cultivated trust in both Irene and Pysche's relationships give the assurance they need to be obedient.

Lastly, for those who are not able to believe their conscience leads them to accept the truth. In *The Princess and Curdie*, Curdie doubts the Grandmother's existence, even though he has witnessed her care through Irene's trust and obedience. His sight and experience were not enough to convince him that she is real and he tries to kill one of the grandmother's pigeons, rationalizing that it is an ordinary bird. The narrator describes the injured bird and Curdie's growing realization in the following: "It did not once flutter or try to get away; it only throbbed and bled and looked at him. What had he done now? He had stopped saving, and had begun killing! What had he been sent into the world for? Surely not to be a death to its joy and loveliness. He had done the thing that was contrary to gladness; he was a destroyer! He was not the Curdie he had been meant to be!"¹⁶ His realization leads him to the grandmother, and he engages in a deeper examination of his conscience. He says to her, "I see now that I have been doing wrong the whole day, and such a many days besides! Indeed, I don't know when I ever did right, and yet it seems as if I had done right some time and had forgotten how. When I killed your bird I did not know I was doing wrong, just because I was always doing wrong, and the wrong had soaked all through me."¹⁷ Curdie is able to come to the truth and this strengthens his vision so that he can eventually see Irene's Grandmother and obey her. Orual also engages in an

¹⁵ Lewis, 123.

¹⁶ George MacDonald. *The Princess and Curdie*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1946, 14-15.

¹⁷ MacDonald, *Curdie*, 31.

examination of conscience through writing her book. “It was a labor of sifting and sorting, separating motive from motive and both from pretext.”¹⁸ She comes to the conclusion that, “To Ungit meant that I was as ugly in soul as she: greedy, blood-gorged. But if I practice true philosophy, I should change my soul into a fair one.”¹⁹ Both Curdie and Orual determine to change their ways when they are able to realize the truth. Only then are they able to see the same realities that Irene and Psyche can see.

MacDonald and Lewis both agree that sight cannot give birth to faith, but once faith is given or received through an examination of conscience, then man can behold the truth and humble himself enough to obey. Irene’s and Psyche’s trust leads them to supernatural realities that break into their lives and change their course. It also gives Curdie and Orual, though doubters at first, an opportunity to come to faith.

¹⁸ Lewis, 256.

¹⁹ Lewis, 281-282.