

Narratives of heaven and hell pervade Christian theology. Whether communicated through images of the blessed chosen ones ascending to eternal joy or the damned languishing in a fiery pit, some expectation of the afterlife is never far from any Christian viewpoint. Typically, individuals perceive a clear separation between the living world and the afterlife, and death marks this boundary. In his seminal work *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky challenges the idea of a clear divide between this life and the next by portraying salvific revelations of heaven and similar condemning experiences of hell in the lives of his characters. These eschatological experiences are rooted in the character's personal theology and their chosen outlook on life, beauty, and suffering. Through these narratives, Dostoevsky presents an image of a world full of beauty and splendor, a sacramental reality within a finite realm, in which a taste of the infinite is possible.

Markel, Father Zosima's brother, embodies the archetype of a character who deliberately chooses to pursue beauty and ultimately attains a heavenly experience. Father Zosima explains that his brother was cruel, unkind, and irreverent to the point of declaring that religion is "all silly twaddle and there is no God" (Dostoevsky 248). But when Markel becomes fatally ill, he undergoes a sudden transformation. Confronted with his mortality, Markel observes what he deems as the beauty of life brought about through recognition of his transience. This experience that "life is glad and joyful" (Dostoevsky 249) completely changes the trajectory of Markel's life. Thereafter, he immerses himself in the magnificence and wonder of life, delighting in everything around him. Markel speaks to his family as they cluster around his bed, encouraging them, "life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but we won't see it, if we would, we should have heaven on earth the next day" (249). Through his active choice to see beauty in life, Markel undergoes a complete spiritual transformation. His entire reality becomes an experience of divine beauty. Zosima remarks, "that's how I remember him sitting, quiet and gentle, smiling, his face bright and joyous, in spite of his illness" (249). This epiphany of beauty inspires Markel to exclaim, "let's go straight into the garden, walk and play there, love, appreciate, and kiss each other, and glorify life" (Dostoevsky 250). This divine sentiment carries Markel's recognition of his past misdeeds and unworthiness. He celebrates, "I have sinned against everyone, yet all forgive me, too, and that's heaven. Am I not in heaven now?" (Dostoevsky 250). Through his sickness, Markel looks outward and embraces the beauty of life, experiencing heaven on earth. Though he lives in the finitude, he has a glimpse of heaven as an infinite reservoir and draws joy from it.

Zosima, is shaped by his brother's divine transformation and salvific experience. Markel's view that "everyone is really responsible to all men for all men" (Dostoevsky 250) informs Zosima's thinking throughout his life that "we are each responsible to all, for all" (Dostoevsky 257). Zosima also glimpses the divine through his brother's experiences. Zosima admits, "I was young then, but a lasting impression, a hidden feeling of it all, remained in my heart, ready to rise up and respond when the time came" (Dostoevsky 251). Years later, after challenging a man to a duel and beating his servant, Zosima remembers Markel's words, "'my dear ones, why do you wait on me, why do you love me, am I worth your waiting on me?'" (Dostoevsky 257). This leads Zosima to question his own convictions, asking himself, "what am I worth that another man, like me, made in the likeness and image of God, should serve me?" (Dostoevsky 257). Markel's wisdom leads Zosima to recognize he does not deserve special treatment but is responsible to serve others, helping them along their paths to find beauty and

truth. Zosima's memory of Markel redirects the trajectory of his life and inspires him to act with virtue and justice. The connection between Zosima's memories of his brother and his own spiritual development parallels Alyosha's sentiments expressed at the novel's end that "if a man carries many such memories with him into life, then he is saved for his whole life" (Dostoevsky 645). Zosima is saved by his memory of Markel, allowing him to minister and care for many others.

Alyosha undergoes a similar spiritual transformation that mirrors Zosima's awakening. Following the death of Father Zosima Alyosha encounters a divine experience that renews his faith and forms memories that guide him throughout the novel. While Zosima's body is open for viewing in a monastery, another priest, Father Paissy, stands nearby reading from the Gospels. During Paissy's reading of "Cana of Galilee," Alyosha has a dream where he becomes a character in that scene. Instead of the typical wedding scene in John 2, the situation has been transported to heaven, representing a simultaneous presence in heaven and earth. In this dream, Zosima speaks to Alyosha, counseling him to pay attention to the wedding. Zosima tells him, "we are rejoicing... we are drinking the new wine, the wine of new, great gladness" (Dostoevsky 311). Alyosha is among the guests in heaven, celebrating, praising God, experiencing the wonder of life. This scene comes at a crucial moment for Alyosha. Following the death of Zosima, Alyosha is disturbed by the injustice with which the townspeople treat the memory of Zosima, who he believes to have been "the holiest of holy men" (Dostoevsky 293). Through this injustice, Alyosha begins to "murmur against his God" (Dostoevsky 293), and although he never comes close to abandoning his faith, he challenges God by forsaking his monastic vows. This dream comes to Alyosha amid his wrestle with God's apparent abandonment of Zosima. Amidst these doubts, Zosima directs Alyosha's attention to Christ, urging him to look closely at the wedding scene. Zosima points out, "he is expecting new guests, he is calling new ones unceasingly forever and ever [...] There they are bringing new wine. Do you see they are bringing the vessels [...]" (Dostoevsky 311). In a time of trial and doubt, Alyosha is reminded of the infinite love of Christ and his salvation. By using the scene of Cana of Galilee to represent this love, Dostoevsky makes clear that Alyosha is experiencing heaven while residing on earth. This dream of heaven causes a revitalization of Alyosha's faith and understanding of God. He awakens and immediately runs outside: "Alyosha ... suddenly threw himself down on the earth... He longed irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss it all" (Dostoevsky 312). At this moment, Alyosha's recognition of the beauty of life mirrors a similar recognition of the divine beauty of his soul. Here, "something firm and unshakeable as the vault of heaven had entered his soul" (Dostoevsky 312). Alyosha's struggles climax in this scene, and he emerges strengthened, actively embracing the divine reality of heaven on earth.

The most profound example of salvific experience is found in the character and death of Ilyusha, an innocent child inflicted with a fatal illness. As Ilyusha struggles, Alyosha Karamazov and his classmates comfort him at his bedside. But instead of comforting Ilyusha, the sick boy cares for his visitors, bringing them together and exemplifying love despite his pain. After the doctor declares he will die very soon, Ilyusha "flung his wasted arms round Papa and Kolya uniting them in one embrace, and hugging them as tightly as he could" (Dostoevsky 472). This powerful scene exhibits the unifying power of love, where Ilyusha brings together his classmate and father in an embrace. Instead of seeking or accepting attention, Ilyusha diverts focus onto others, encouraging them to hold and love one another. Ilyusha's suffering serves to unify those around him in love. Ilyusha's death shakes them greatly, but only in proportion to their love.

Snergiryov, Ilyusha's father, also suffers in proportion to his love for his son. Ilyusha counsels his father, "Papa don't cry, and when I die get a good boy, another one [...] Choose one of them all, a good one, call him Ilyusha and love him instead of me...." (Dostoevsky 473). He does not pity himself but rather those around him who feel pain on his behalf. He says to his father, "Papa, papa! How sorry I am for you, papa" (Dostoevsky 473). Ilyusha recognizes the grief that his suffering brings and so sacrifices his right to be comforted. Ilyusha's suffering provides him a unique opportunity to bring others together through his pain. He unifies Alyosha, his family, and his schoolfellows by his bedside as they mourn his pain and celebrate his life. Ilyusha's pain provides a salvific experience for his father and the schoolboys while fostering unity among them.

Like Zosima's brother, the memory of Ilyusha's life and suffering helps the boys recognize life's beauty and their calling toward building deep, celebratory community. At the funeral, Alyosha counsels the boys to keep Ilyusha's memory alive. Alyosha explains that this memory will protect them from evil and strengthen their efforts to live virtuous lives. After burying Ilyusha, a tearful Alyosha tells the boys, "Let us never forget him, and may his memory be eternal and good in our hearts now" (Dostoevsky 646). He encourages them that "One memory may keep [us] from great evil, and [we] will reflect and say, 'Yes, I was good and brave and honest then'" (645). In this way, the memory of Ilyusha is both unifying and redemptive. This community, based on love and salvific suffering, is reminiscent of the Christian kingdom of heaven. The actions and life of Ilyusha encourage the other boys to believe that there is deep peace and goodness beyond his suffering and pain. Alyosha encourages them to celebrate this truth, exclaiming, "ah little children, ah, dear friends, don't be afraid of life! How good life is when someone does something good and just!" (Dostoevsky 646). Through Ilyusha's unifying love, the boys come together to form a group that resembles a heavenly community, lifting one another in love, and reminding each other of the importance of goodness and justice.

Just as heaven is accessible through the conscious recognition of beauty and joy, characters also go through hellish experiences because of their inability to reconcile suffering and evil with any understanding of goodness. Ivan Karamazov is one such figure. Devastated by what he perceives as the unjust suffering of innocent people, Ivan rejects his faith, stating, "It's not that I don't accept God, you must understand, it's the world created by Him I don't and cannot accept" (Dostoevsky 203). Ivan reasons that because a good God cannot allow innocent children to suffer, God cannot truly be good. With these concerns, Ivan comes to reject the idea of heaven, exclaiming, "it's not worth one little tear of even just that one tormented child" (Dostoevsky 212). Until Ivan can rectify the problem of evil with God, the reality he experiences can only be hell. Despite this rejection of God, Ivan remains redeemable and Alyosha strives to find the remaining light inside his brother. At the end of Ivan's speech on the pain of the innocents, Alyosha responds, "the little sticky leaves, and the precious tombs, and the blue sky, and the woman you love! How will you live, how will you love them? ... With such a hell in your heart and your head, how can you?" (Dostoevsky 228).

Exclusive attention to suffering causes Ivan to increasingly find more pain and grief, forcing him downwards into his own mental hell. This is fully realized when the Devil visits Ivan after his last visit with Smeddyakov. The Devil speaks with Ivan and reinforces his conclusions regarding suffering and existence. In doing so, the Devil pushes Ivan further into his mental anguish and torment. The Devil remarks, "without suffering what would be the pleasure of [life]? It would be transformed into an endless church service; it would be holy, but tedious"

(Dostoevsky 540). These remarks solidify Ivan's belief in the necessity of suffering as a prerequisite for harmony and support Ivan's conclusion that "everyone must suffer in order to buy eternal harmony with suffering" (Dostoevsky 211). Contrary to the salvific suffering of Ilyusha, the suffering Ivan perceives is hopeless and irredeemable; instead of fostering connection, it only separates and destroys. He laments, "All I know is that there is suffering and that there are none guilty, that cause follows effect, simply and directly" (Dostoevsky 211). But the more Ivan focuses on suffering, the more he denies beauty, and the more he denies beauty, the more grief he perceives. Through this myopia, Ivan effectively chooses to experience hell. This cripples Ivan's mental state and contributes to his deteriorating condition at the novel's end.

Lise is not concerned with the suffering of others but rather revels in the evil that exists around her. She asserts, "I want disorder. I keep wanting to set fire to the house. I keep imagining how I'll creep up and set fire to the house on the sly" (Dostoevsky 490). Far from delighting in good, Lise delights in evil. She chooses hell over heaven and enjoys her choice, or at least believes that she does. Lise enjoys evil because she is bored with good. She acknowledges, "everyone says [evil is] so awful, but secretly they simply love it" (Dostoevsky 491). Good is commonplace and ordinary for her, whereas evil is exciting and destructive, a seemingly deeper experience than the often vacuous "good" those around her claim to love. Lise's true relationship with evil and hell is revealed when Alyosha leaves. As he gets ready to depart, Lise reaches out to him and exclaims, "save me! [...] I don't want to live, because I loathe everything" (Dostoevsky 491). Lise longs to escape the hellish reality she has brought upon herself and cannot experience beauty or goodness because she loathes everything, including herself. Once Alyosha leaves, Lise "unbolted the door, opened it a little, put her finger in the crack, and slammed the door with all her might" (Dostoevsky 492). She slams the door on her own finger as a form of self-punishment, believing she deserves the pain. Lise's self-harm represents her self-hatred and echoes her call to Alyosha to help save her from herself. Much like Ivan, Lise's focus on suffering, pain, and evil creates a hellish image of life in her mind and causes her to loathe her own existence.

Dostoevsky acknowledges the hell experienced by some of his characters and offers suggestions for escaping it. First, through the lives of Markel, Zosima, and Alyosha, Dostoevsky asserts the redemptive power of memory. Zosima, on the morning of an impending duel, suddenly remembers Markel's words that "life is paradise," and radically changes his life, abandoning his military career for a life in the monastery. Alyosha, too is saved by his memories of Zosima during his dream of the wedding at Cana of Galilee. It is postulated that Ivan and Lise can escape their torment by recollecting previous experiences of love and joy. Additionally, Dostoevsky recognizes the power of relationship to create similar salvific experiences. When Alyosha visits Grushenka, he comforts her in her decision to forgive a former lover. This indecision had tortured her for years, and it is only through her relationship with Alyosha that she can release it and heal. She tearfully declares, "I've been waiting all my life for someone like you, I knew that someone like you would come and forgive me... [I believed] someone would really love me" (Dostoevsky 307). Further, Grushenka encourages Alyosha and comforts him after Zosima's death, leading Alyosha to declare, "you've lifted my soul up from the depths" (Dostoevsky 302). A similar relationship exists between Alyosha and Lise. Though Lise suffers from a love of evil and hatred of what is good, she acknowledges this and beseeches Alyosha to save her. Dostoevsky scholar Paul Contino explains Alyosha's ability to act as a spiritual guide, writing, "[Lise] recognizes her need for the Christ-like Alyosha, and for the grace he mediates:

just before she utters another blasphemy, she turns and begs him to save her” (Contino 180). Thus, although characters can fall into an earthly hell, they can be lifted by God, memory, and relationships with one another to move toward heaven.

Through the narratives and perspectives of his characters, Dostoevsky communicates that earthly experiences of the afterlife depend upon individual choices and interpersonal relationships. Salvation and damnation are both accessible during this life, and each individual is responsible for what they find. Markel clarifies that those who seek paradise will find it in this life, and the paradise of heaven is available to all. This recognition of heaven does not come from denying suffering, as might be expected. Instead, the characters who experience this bliss most intensely are those who can find beauty despite suffering. Experiences of heaven often follow challenging times in a character’s life. Suffering allows the character to see beauty more clearly and with a greater appreciation. Markel’s revelation that life is paradise, comes after significant sickness. He realizes that he is dying, but when faced with this pain and suffering he manages to find beauty and seek joy. Markel’s experience of beauty is amplified by his suffering, and while he does not suffer so that he might experience joy, he finds joy despite the pain.

Similarly, Alyosha’s experience of joy during the reading of John 2 comes immediately after the death of Father Zosima. Alyosha’s revelation of heaven is intensified when juxtaposed with the pain he experienced only hours before. When he returns to the monastery, Alyosha is confronted with a host of emotions: “his soul was overflowing but with mingled feelings; no single sensation stood out distinctly; on the contrary, one drove out another in a slow, continual rotation” (Dostoevsky 309). The injustice against Zosima had not been resolved, but Alyosha finds peace and comfort despite this pain. Confronted with the joy of experiencing the scene of the wedding at Cana of Galilee, “the smell of corruption, which had seemed to him so awful and humiliating a few hours before, no longer made him feel miserable or indignant” (Dostoevsky 309). Alyosha’s suffering is resolved by his joy, and his experience of heaven allows him to see that beauty, and love exist, even amidst suffering.

Alyosha conveys this revelation of beauty to the schoolboys at Ilyusha’s funeral. The funeral is an emotional event, and the suffering of those present is clear: “all the boys were crying, and Kolya and the boy who discovered about Troy most of all” (Dostoevsky 643). After the ceremony, Alyosha takes the boys aside and encourages them to remember how Ilyusha’s love brought them together and never forget Ilyusha or each other. In a moment full of grief and pain, Alyosha advises the boys to look past the suffering to the joy and celebration that will come. Alyosha counsels, “let us never forget how good it was once here, when we were all together, united by a good and kind feeling which made us, for the time we were loving that poor boy, better perhaps than we are” (645). Alyosha hints at this theme of suffering followed by joy after his speech to the children. He remarks, “well, now we finish talking and go to his funeral dinner. Don’t be put out at our eating pancakes - it’s something ancient, eternal, and there’s something good in that” (Dostoevsky 646). Contino comments on this scene, explaining, “the active love of Alyosha and the boys has borne fruit not only in an affirmation of eternal life, but an experiential taste of it” (Contino 192). In eating pancakes, the boys catch a glimpse of the eternal joy and gladness of heaven. The juxtaposition of Alyosha’s grief and his commendation of the coming feast is central to Dostoevsky’s vision of life. These few lines contain within them the entire premise of Alyosha’s speech to the boys. Life is full of suffering and pain, but there is redemption, beauty, and joy through that pain. Life is, above all else, a celebration of love and goodness in defiance of suffering.

Celebration through suffering seems intuitively incoherent. Kolya admits to Alyosha, “it’s all so strange, Karamaov, such grief and then suddenly pancakes” (Dostoevsky 644). The life Dostoevsky envisions is exactly so. Ilyusha’s death brings sadness for a time, but it also brings community, fellowship, and joy. Both must be attended to: the coffin and the pancakes cannot be separated. When there is cause to grieve, we must grieve deeply and fully, and when the grieving is complete, we should turn toward one another in joyful celebration. In doing so, we experience heaven on earth, the presence of divinity in joy and lament. Whether it’s pancakes at a funeral or new wine at a wedding, Dostoevsky encourages us that Christ is with us in both the grieving and the celebration, and that his presence brings heaven down to earth. In this finite life, we have a taste of the infinite joy available to all that is present and still to come.

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