

Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963): Great Faith and Great Doubt

My introduction to the powerful, creative writings of C.S. Lewis came through his *Pilgrim's Regress*, which I had to study for a course in English literature. Ever since I have consulted his works and greatly benefited from them.

Lewis is undoubtedly our century's most popular and influential Christian author, who achieved worldwide fame for his books on apologetics, theology, and science fiction. His theological writings are renowned for their masterful style and force of logic. Experts in children's literature claim that his seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56) rank among the finest stories of our time. His books reportedly sell 1.5 million copies every year. He is considered one of the most quotable authors who ever lived. His style excels in clarity, grace, and beauty.

Lewis seemed to have had abounding energy. He was a careful steward of time and money, and consistently generous. He was also a scrupulously honest and humble man, who cherished his privacy. His spirituality was down to earth, full of realism. He was dead scared of sentimentalism.

Lewis's influence is phenomenal. He was a writer with a mission. He said that most of his books were evangelistic. He was, as Dorothy Sayers phrased it in one of her letters, "God's terrier"-a man with "missionary zeal." Few people have helped more seekers on the way to Christ than Lewis. Some of our most influential Christian writers today testify that this author of nearly 40 books assisted them in finding the Savior. The names of Os Guinness, Charles Colson and Joy Davidman are some of them. His works have also been instrumental in gaining recruits for missions. In 1954 an administrator in the largest mainline American Presbyterian denomination surveyed all of the career missionaries at home and abroad. One of the questions asked was, "What person most influenced your decision to become a missionary?" Fifty percent wrote--C.S. Lewis.

Lewis had no time for faddish modern theology. He felt that any attempt to dilute the gospel by denying miracles or reducing Christ's teaching to ethical platitudes was an attack upon the heart of the Christian faith. He said, "When you turn from the New Testament to modern scholars, remember that you go among them as sheep among wolves." He was all for sound doctrine and not the woolly-mindedness of so many of his contemporaries who wanted "religion without dogma."

Lewis was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and brought up there. His father was a solicitor and his mother the daughter of a clergyman. He was baptized in the Church of Ireland, but received little formal help in his search for truth from either his parents or his church. At the age of ten his mother died. He remembered how he had prayed for healing, believing that prayer offered in faith would be answered. He saw God as a magician. After the death of his mother his faith left him and for years he was in theological confusion. He said, "All the tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life." His mother's early death, his long separations from his brother, and his father's melancholia, all led him to believe that God either did not exist or that He was dead.

Since no one can live in a void, he searched for the meaning of life. This led to contacts with pagans, unbelievers and materialists of all varieties. As a young schoolboy he was even exposed to occultism when he came under the influence of the matron of Malvern; a school he attended for one year. He describes her as "floundering in the mazes of Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, Spiritualism, the whole Anglo-American Occultist tradition." After Malvern he was educated privately by W.T. Kirkpatrick his father's old headmaster, to prepare him for entrance into Oxford. Kirkpatrick was a rigorous logician, who has been described as a "rationalist atheist of the stern and highly moral 19th century variety." By the time Lewis came under his influence he was already a convinced atheist. Kirkpatrick's relentless logic, insisting that beliefs must be based on evidence, and that unexamined opinions can lead to the ridiculous, only reinforced Lewis's own beliefs. Chad Walsh observes, "The irony was that the very habits of rigorous thought that the sturdy old atheist taught him were in time to prove one of the two roads back to the faith he had rejected." Lewis was an avid reader. His most important literary guide in his spiritual journey was George MacDonald (1824-1905). The latter was a Scottish theologian, a Victorian author with a lucid style and imagination, best known for his fairy tales for young people and fantasies for adults. He was also a novelist and a poet, writing some 26 novels in which he scrutinized human behavior and commented on it from a Christian point of view. MacDonald has probably influenced every book Lewis has written. (Many of MacDonald's remarkable works have been republished in abbreviated editions and in modern English by Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, Minnesota).

S.C. Lewis is often portrayed as a man cloistered in his study, detached from the world, an armchair theologian. This is not true in fact. In 1916 Lewis was elected a scholar of University College, Oxford, but World War 1 prevented him from assuming his studies. He joined the war effort and spent two years in the trenches where he was wounded. When he resumed his studies in 1918, he did exceedingly well. In his late twenties Lewis began his journey back to God. His conversion was not dramatic, but gradual. Slowly he went from great doubt to great faith. One road that led to his conversion was "the workings of his mind." He carefully examined various philosophies-evolutionism, pantheism, atheism and found them wanting. None of them could stand up under logical scrutiny. The other road was the way of "Romance" or "Joy", a yearning for something or someone beyond himself, a dimension of reality that cannot be explained.

By the age of thirty he felt that God was closing in on him. Lewis's conversion was different from the dramatic conversion experience of Christian in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian leaped for joy after his sudden conversion. Lewis slowly came to realize that he could no longer resist God. And he confesses, "That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

After his conversion he had a few months of struggle about the role of Christ, but finally became convinced that the Incarnation was historical fact; "that the Jesus so sharply outlined in the New Testament was one with the God who captured a reluctant convert

during Trinity Term." He became orthodox in his theology, a staunch defender of the faith and a member of the Church of England. He was neither a fundamentalist nor an evangelical as those terms are normally used in North America. In the preface of his published BBC talks given during World War II he writes, "There is no mystery about my position. I am a very ordinary layman of the Church of England, not especially 'high' nor especially 'low', nor especially anything else." Evangelicals and conservatives have a hard time placing him... Lewis's orthodoxy has always appealed to them, but they are disturbed by his lower view of the inspiration of Scripture. (He holds the Bible to be a literary vehicle containing the Word of God.)

Bob Jones Jr. of Bob Jones University, a strict American fundamentalist institution, was asked what he thought about C.S. Lewis. "That man," said Dr. Jones, weighing every syllable, "smokes a pipe, and that man drinks liquor, but I do believe he is a Christian"

C.S. Lewis believed in a God who is there; who hears, speaks and is able to act. He had a devout and intense prayer life. Someone calculated that this exceptionally busy author must have spent a minimum of an hour to an hour and a half a day in prayer. He attached great importance to intercessory prayer. He apparently prayed for the conversion of unbelievers, and he asked others to join him in this endeavor. He also prayed for the health and economic needs of friends and acquaintances. He believed that prayer and action go hand in hand. And he said that a prayer indicating surrender of self-will and self-love is more important than getting our own way. Prayer is primarily the language of the soul in encounter with God.

Lewis even made a substantial contribution to the theology of prayer. His last work, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (completed in April 1963, just seven months before his death and published posthumously) is an imaginative stimulant to prayer. In it he gives some practical advice. He writes to Malcolm, "And talking of sleepiness, I entirely agree with you that no one in his senses, if he has any power of ordering his own day, would reserve his chief prayers for bed time, obviously the worst possible hour for any action which needs concentration." And he says, "I'd rather pray sitting in a crowded train than put it off till midnight when one reaches a hotel bedroom with aching head and drying throat and one's mind partly in stupor and partly in a whirl." He preferred the kneeling posture as the body ought to pray as well as the soul.

Lewis's Christianity was not conventional. He believed that Christ did not come to make people more religious, but to make them new. "God became man," said Lewis, "to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man." The cost of renewal was high. To convert rebellious wills cost our Lord the crucifixion. But if Christians are renewed why aren't all of them nicer than non-Christians? Of course a Christian must act like one. Says Lewis, "When we Christians behave badly, or fail to behave well, we are making Christianity unbelievable to the outside world." But we must also remember that Christians are not all alike. They have different temperaments. The non-Christian may have a kinder tongue than the Christian. But what would the tongue be like if it were not under Christian control? To become new people means to lose what we now call "ourselves" and to submit our thoughts and wills

to Christ. We give up our self to find our real self. We may not keep anything back. We die to our ambitions and favorite wishes every day. This is called "daily conversion" in Reformed theology.

C.S. Lewis was almost like, in a modern way (although he abhorred modernity), an Old Testament prophet calling people back to God. He did not believe in a watered-down, easy believism Christianity, a faith without discipline.

Christianity is the way to the cross. Lewis notes that some people think that carrying the cross means nothing more than leading a respectable life and subscribing moderately to charities. But according to Lewis this belief is nonsense.

Christianity is both hard and easy. Christ says, "Give me all. And I will give you a new self instead. In fact I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours." Christ says "Take up your cross"--in other words, it's like going to be beaten to death in a concentration camp." Next minute He says, "My yoke is easy and my burden light." He means both.

In our, "I want my rights" obsessed generation, Lewis wrote much that goes against the grain. He had experienced suffering and profound grief. His own final illness did not develop suddenly. He knew that he was dying some weeks before the end. Yet he continued with his work as he delighted to share his faith until he was made incapable of it. His last article, "*We Have No Right to Happiness*," was written for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Seven days before his death he was reading the proofs and putting a call through to New York to insist that nothing in the article could be changed.

Is one of the rights of man the right "to the pursuit of happiness?" Lewis argues, "A right to happiness doesn't for me, make much more sense than the right to be six feet tall, or to have a millionaire for your father, or to get good weather whenever you want to have a picnic." Does someone have a right to a divorce simply because he or she is no longer sexually satisfied or happy? Lewis observes, "When two people achieve lasting happiness, this is not solely because they are great lovers but because they are also, and I must put it crudely, good people; controlled, loyal, fair-minded, mutually adaptable people." And he notes that where promiscuity prevails, there will always be more victims than culprits. Everyone knows that the man or the woman who deserted their spouse in a year or so may have the same reason for leaving the new partner as for deserting the old. If our generation keeps insisting on "I want my rights" our technological skill may help survive us a little longer, but our civilization will have died at heart, and will-one dare not even add unfortunately-be swept away." A prophetic warning indeed!

As a writer Lewis was unashamedly Christian. He wrote about the miraculous, breaking through time and space. Someone remarked that every little line he wrote, fiction or argument, is as astonishingly new as the day it was written. His message is timely because it is true. He was a master wordsmith. He projected his ideas as an encounter with another person--"a man speaking to men." His books show that Christianity is capable of dealing with tough questions and of building a "scaffolding that supports all

truth." Of the 40 books he has written I will only discuss a few. In 1933 he began to be noticed with *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*. As the title suggests, it was patterned after John Bunyan's famous *Pilgrim's Progress*. It was a difficult book, which didn't sell very well. It was the story of his conversion, presenting the concept of longing for the infinite as the motivating factor. He highlights his conversion as primarily intellectual. Lewis wrote to a friend that *Pilgrim's Regress* was his first religious book and didn't then know how to make things easy.

In 1936 came *The Allegory of Love. a Study in Medieval Tradition*. Scholars claim that this was his greatest work. In 1938 appeared the first of his science-fiction novels (a type hardly then known). The settings of his space trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra* (1943) and *That Hideous Strength*, (1945) are respectively Mars, Venus and Earth. But even these books embraced Christian apologetics and allegory. And in a time when the scientist was regarded as a superman, he demonstrated the limitations of science. That's why secular scholars have questioned whether these works can even be considered true science fiction because of "Lewis's preference for angels rather than spaceships." (Lewis did pay a price for his ardent espousal of his Christian faith. It cost him a promotion. Chad Walsh said that even those colleagues who did not object to his faith often wished he would concentrate more on his specialty--English scholarship).

In 1940 came *The Problem of Pain*, an appropriate theme as the world had been plunged into war. Of this book he would say, with a twinkle, that it was not a medical handbook, as some thought it was, but a book dealing with the subject of the paradox of suffering mankind and a good God. This popularly written book became a best seller.

One of Lewis's most popular books was *The Screwtape Letters* (1942). It takes the form of letters from an experienced devil to a novice devil. (Although the book is fictional, Lewis had an orthodox view of Satan and the tragic results of sin). The focus of the letters is on the pitfalls which are dug for Christians by their enemy. A young man, a new convert, is caught between the demands and promises of his Christian faith, and all the ideas and temptations working to destroy it. A spiritual warfare is fought between God's kingdom and Satan's forces (Eph. 6:12). Lewis reminds his readers that the devil is a liar and the father of hell. Hell is a real place. Lewis argues that opposed to the beatific vision of Heaven and happiness is the "miserific vision" of Hell and suffering.

The Great Divorce: a Dream (1946) expounds the vast gulf fixed between heaven and hell. It presents the reasons for Hell. Lewis uses the most popular argument for hell--human freedom. We are living in a world, writes Lewis, where every road, after a few miles, forks into two, and at each fork you must make a decision. We must choose for or against God. We are created free. A God of love will not force anyone into heaven against his will. Hell is a place where people "enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded." Lewis describes a man in hell, who says, "I gone straight all my life. I don't say I was a religious man and I don't say I had no faults, far from it. But I done my best all my life, see? I done my best by everyone, that's the sort of chap I was. I never asked for anything that wasn't mine by rights ...I only want my rights. I'm not asking for

anybody's bleeding charity." God respects His creature's choices. As C.S. Lewis noted, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done, and those to whom God says, in the end, Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell."

The Great Divorce was followed in 1947 by *Miracles: a Preliminary Study*. Lewis defines the word "miracle" as an "interference with Nature by supernatural power." Miracles are wonderful testimonies of God's involvement in His creation. Christians accept the reality of miracles because of the Incarnation. Lewis argues, "The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this."

" C.S. Lewis had an impact on American religious thinking and indeed on the American religious imagination which has been rarely, if ever, equaled by any other modern writer." This was the view of American scholar Chad Walsh, who went on to say that Lewis, "performed a special mission with people who were slowly finding their way towards some sort of Christian orthodoxy." In contrast to the obscure jargon of modern theologians Lewis's exposition of Christian doctrine is clear and vivid. He loved reading doctrinal works and became a competent "lay" theologian.

Before Lewis became a Christian he believed that all religions are the same. "All Religions," he wrote in a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves, "that is all mythologies, are merely man's own invention." After his conversion he saw that there was only one road to God. He wrote that the fall of man occasioned the Incarnation of Christ. Only Christ could take our sin upon Himself. "But only a Man who did not need to have been a Man at all unless He had chosen, only one who served in our sad regiment as a volunteer, yet also only one who was perfectly a Man, could perform this perfect dying; and thus (which way you put it is unimportant) either defeat death or redeem it. He tasted on behalf of all others." Lewis wrote that a man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. "He'd either be a lunatic, on a level with the man who says he's a poached egg, or else he'd be the Devil of Hell You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call him Lord and God. But don't let us come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to."

God intended man to be His viceroy upon His earth as the ruler of nature. But man became self-seeking and blind to God's purposes for Him. He rebelled against God. In *Mere Christianity* Lewis describes pride as the great sin, "the complete anti-God state of mind." Because of man's fallen nature he cannot build the new Jerusalem on earth. Lewis looked forward to the overthrow of Earth's Dark Lord and the remaking of the Silent Planet into the paradise God had intended it to be.

In the unusual and timely film *Shadowlands*, positively reviewed by secular and Christian magazines, the story of Lewis's romance with Joy Davidman Gresham is

compellingly told. In our fragmented world with its breakdown of the family structure and the unwillingness of so many to commit themselves to anything or anyone, *Shadowlands* serves as a powerful reminder that real love for and commitment to one's marriage partner are still possible.

Joy, born in 1915, a stimulating, outspoken and witty intellectual, came of a secularized Jewish background in New York City. She had a college and university education. She looked for spiritual and emotional satisfaction in Communism, but after several years of party membership ended up with a total disillusionment and hatred for it. As a young author she won considerable acclaim for her book of verse *Letter to a Comrade*. She also published two novels. At one of the Party meetings she became attracted to Gresham, a fellow communist, who had already been married and divorced before they met and married in 1942. Gresham's drinking caused domestic stress. He was also frequently unfaithful to his wife. She came to the Christian faith through reading Lewis's books. Because of her deep appreciation for Lewis she began a correspondence with him. In 1952 she went to England and met Lewis. While there word reached her that her husband was in love with another woman. She returned to the U.S.A. to try to salvage her marriage, but didn't succeed. After her divorce she and her two sons were back in England in 1954. And once again she visited Lewis. For reasons which remain unexplained, the Home Office refused to renew her residence permit. On April 23, 1956, Lewis and Joy were secretly married at the Oxford registry office, thus giving her and the two boys British nationality. Lewis had no romantic feelings for her at this time. He explained that his marriage was a practical formality and had nothing to do with a real marriage. Late 1956 it was discovered that Joy had cancer. "No one," Lewis once observed, "can mark the exact moment at which friendship becomes love." But when Joy was physically least attractive, she won his heart. In November, while Joy was still undergoing operations Lewis told one of his regular correspondents: "I may soon be, in rapid succession, a bridegroom and a widower. There may, in fact, be a deathbed marriage." Joy did not want to die in the hospital, and Lewis felt that he could not bring her home until they were married before the Lord. It was assumed that the bride had little time left to live. Their marriage was solemnized in a Christian ceremony in the hospital.

After C.S. Lewis (called Jack by friends) and his wife Joy, hopeless invalid, had settled in their home an amazing healing took place. A remission occurred. By slow degrees Joy moved from bed to wheelchair to cane to almost normal walking. In a letter to friends, Joy wrote: "My case is now arrested for the time being. I may be alright for three or four years. Jack and I are managing to be surprisingly happy considering the circumstances; you'd think we were a honeymoon couple in our early twenties, rather than our middle-aged selves..."

Jack's love for Joy blossomed. It was given new intensity by her reprieve from cancer. In her surviving years Joy greatly enriched Lewis's life. He had never experienced such happiness as during this time. He could apply to his own marriage the famous lines of Elizabeth Barrett Browning she had written to her husband,

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach, when feeling out of sight. For the ends of Being and Ideal Grace ...I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears, of all my life!--and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death."

This newly found love at such a late stage in life overwhelmed Lewis. He told friends, "Do you know I am experiencing what I thought would never be mine. I never thought I would have in my sixties the happiness that passed me by in my twenties." Douglas Gresham, Joy's son, testified, "There were never two people alive in the history of the world who were more in love than Jack and Joy."

In October 1959 a routine X-ray check showed that Joy's cancer had returned. And by March 1960, three years after the hospital wedding ceremony, the cancer no longer responded to treatments. This time there was to be no miracle. On July 13, 1960, she died in the hospital. Two of the last things she said to Jack were, "You have made me happy," and "I am at peace with God." Joy's death devastated Lewis. He had always believed emotion to be "something uncomfortable and embarrassing and even dangerous." And so when Joy died he found it extremely hard to cope with his emotions. He questioned his faith and was plagued by doubts. "I not only live each endless day in grief," he wrote, "but I live each day thinking about living each day in grief...what am I to do?" He found relief through writing down his thoughts, later published in a book *A Grief Observed*.

At the end of the movie *Shadowlands* Lewis's faith seems to have been shattered by the death of Joy. People expected him to find consolation in the faith he had so faithfully defended and proclaimed, but he couldn't. The Christian of great faith was plagued by great doubts. The floodtide of doubts which had entered his mind shocked Lewis. "Why do I make room in my mind for such filth and nonsense?" he wondered. And after reading *A Grief Observed*, a powerful biographical work written after Joy's death, some even claimed that her tragic end had destroyed Lewis's faith. Lewis, like every believer, had moments of doubts. And after a terrible loss of a beloved marriage partner, who remains untouched by grief? But rather than denying or ignoring his doubts he discusses them openly. He dares to raise tough questions and writes about his struggles with God. "Where is God?" he asks. "But to go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence." "Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?" Lewis is brutally honest with himself. He writes of his despair and dark thoughts. The great Christian apologist seems even to question the reality of his faith when he says, "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you" And "What reason have we, except our own desperate wishes, to believe that God is, by any standard we can conceive, 'good'? Doesn't all the prima facie evidence suggest exactly the opposite?"

But Lewis never lost his faith. His doubts never paralyzed his ability to think. He never once believed that God was the "Cosmic Sadist." He told a friend, who had read his *A*

Grief Observed, "The structure is based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. You go down and down. Then, as in Dante, when you hit bottom and pass Lucifer's waist you go up to defense of God's goodness." He hoped that through his book he was able to help the average sufferer. The proof that Lewis never lost his faith is found in his last book *Letters to Malcolm*. Writing of his belief in life after death, he is convinced that the Christian shall inhabit the new heaven and earth. And "we know that we shall be made like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

Contrary to what some Christians teach, it is not a sin to have doubts. Doubt is a very human emotion, often caused by a crisis or a hardship. Lewis's doubts came through his grief over the loss of his beloved wife. He described his grief as "a bomber circling round and dropping its bombs each time the circle brings it overhead." But he knew where to turn with his doubts. He laid his questions before the Lord, but he got no answer. Though he said that the no answer was of a special sort. "It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, 'Peace, child: you don't understand.'"

Through his grief and doubts he learned some invaluable spiritual lessons. He came to the conclusion that he had approached his grief from a wrong perspective altogether. He wrote about his musings: "These notes have been about myself, and about Joy, and about God. In that order. The order and the proportions exactly what they ought not to have been." Once he saw the right order he realized that God was the answer after all. As he wrote at the end of *Till We Have Faces*, "I know now, Lord, why you; utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other, answer would suffice? Only words, words, words; to be led out to battle against other words." How did he come to know this truth? Through careful study of the Scriptures. In time of need Lewis always turned to them for guidance and comfort. Through them he found the "God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3) to be real. He also spent much time in prayer. He did not often pray with others, except with his hired driver, Mr. Clifford Morris, an evangelical Anglican, who was accustomed to praying extemporaneously in small groups. Although the two men never made this a regular habit, Morris told a friend of Lewis that after Joy's death they spent considerable time together in prayer. Lewis experienced God's presence and love. And he loved his God. He was not afraid of aging and death. A few months before his death on November 22, 1963, this brilliant thinker, greatly used by the Spirit to lead many seekers to the house of the Father, wrote, "Think of yourself just as a seed patiently waiting in the earth, waiting to come up a flower in the Gardener's good time, up into the real world, the real waking. I suppose that our whole present life, looked back from there, will seem only a drowsy half-waking. We are here in the land of dreams. But cockcrow is coming..."

I pray that the writings of this unique Christian will continue to challenge many in this age of despair and doubt.

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