

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 92

C.S. Lewis

Today, we discuss one of my favorites: Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963). Like Aquinas, Augustine, Luther, and many others we have covered in this class, Lewis likely deserves more than one week of coverage; however, one week is all we have to devote to him. So, how do we discuss a man who authored over 50 books, of whom dozens of books have been written, and at least one outstanding biographical movie has been made? How do we do all that in a 45-minute lesson? We omit needless words, lengthy introductions, and get right to the meat!

We will approach Lewis by giving a biographical sketch that provides framework for understanding his Christian contributions. We will then find short vignettes and impact passages from a number of his works (True confessions: I am picking my favorites!). We will use Lewis's own words wherever possible. In the process, and perhaps most usefully, we will provide some information about many of his books that helps one who might want to pick some materials to read outside this class. In other words, go through this paper and find some good Christmas gifts to give others or to seek for yourself!

THE LIFE OF C. S. LEWIS

Lewis was born November 29, 1898, in Belfast, Ireland to Protestant parents. His father was a lawyer, and his mother was a homemaker. Lewis had a dog, Jacksie, who was run over by one of the early cars in Ireland when Lewis was just four. Lewis told everyone from thereon that Lewis should be called "Jacksie," and for the rest of his life, friends called him Jack. Lewis also had one sibling, a brother Warren, who was three years older.

Growing up in Ireland, Lewis developed a close friendship with a boy named Arthur Greaves. Lewis and Arthur spent a lifetime writing to each other, and most of those letters were saved. The letters are a great resource for reconstructing not only aspects of Lewis's life, but also his thoughts, beliefs, and inner issues that corresponded with his daily life.

Lewis had an early love for literature, rejecting athletic endeavors (for which he had no gift) in favor of reading and writing. Lewis was also fond of drawing. At an early age, Lewis and his brother would draw animal creatures who could talk, projecting through pen and paper fictional worlds that would later resurface in Lewis's Narnia books for children. The Irish weather contributed to this outlet and self-entertainment. Poor weather often kept the Lewis boys from playing

outside. With no television or radio to entertain them, the boys came up with their own entertainment.

We always had pencils, paper, chalk, and paint-boxes, and this recurring imprisonment gave us occasion and stimulus to develop the habit of creative imagination. We learnt to draw; my brother made his first attempts at writing; together we devised the imaginary country of 'Boxen,' which proliferated hugely and became our solace and joy for many years to come.¹

When Lewis was ten, his mother died from cancer. The following year, Lewis was sent to boarding school in England. Over the next several years, Lewis bounced around multiple boarding schools, eventually coming under the authority of his father's old tutor, W. T. Kirkpatrick, affectionately known to Lewis as "The Great Knock." At this point in time, Lewis had left his childhood faith and proudly proclaimed himself an atheist, the same belief system as his tutor, Kirkpatrick.

Losing his mother at an early age contributed to Lewis's early atheism about God. Lewis believed one of the strongest atheistic arguments to be:

Had God designed the world, it would not be
A world so frail and faulty as we see.²

Lewis would later write that he was "very angry at God for not existing!"³ Lewis wrote his childhood friend Greaves explaining, "I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best."⁴ Lewis then took Greaves to task for not joining the educated and thinking they know better.

In 1916, Lewis won a scholarship to University College, Oxford, and being Irish, Lewis was beyond the English draft powers for fighting in World War I. Still, Lewis enlisted in the Army and was sent to fight in the front lines in France on his 19th birthday. While training, Lewis had made a pact with his army buddy, Paddy

¹ C. S. Lewis quoted in Gilbert and Kilby, *C. S. Lewis – Images of His World* (Eerdmans 2005) at 26.

² Lewis quoted in Sims, John, *Missionaries to the Skeptics: Christian Apologists for the Twentieth Century*, C.S. Lewis, E.J. Carnell, and Reinhold Niebuhr (Mercer University Press 1995) at 25.

³ *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955) at 115.

⁴ *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Vol. 1* (Harper, San Francisco 2004) at 230.

Moore, that should anything happen to either one, the other would look out for the survivor's family. Paddy was killed in action in 1918 and Lewis kept his word, caring for Paddy's mother until her death in 1951.

Lewis was injured in battle on April 15, 1917, and was reassigned to England for the rest of his military time. After his discharge in December 1918, Lewis returned to his schooling at Oxford. Lewis was a top-flight student receiving the highest grades ("Firsts") in multiple classes.

Following Lewis's schooling, Lewis took a position teaching Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalen College, Oxford. At Oxford, Lewis made many life long connections that drew him both toward faith and friendship. Lewis would later write:

When I began teaching for the English Faculty, I made two other friends, both Christians (these queer [*meaning "odd"*] people seemed now to pop up on every side) who were later to give me much help in getting over the last stile. They were H.V.V. Dyson...and J.R.R. Tolkien. Friendship with the latter marked the breakdown of two old prejudices. At my first coming into the world I had been (implicitly) warned never to trust a Papist [*derogatory term for Roman Catholic*], and at my first coming into the English Faculty (explicitly) never to trust a philologist [*one who studies language in its historical and cultural context*]. Tolkien was both.⁵

In 1929, while at Oxford, Lewis became a Christian. His conversion was a two-step process. First, Lewis rejected his atheism and decided intellectually that there must be a God. At a later time, Lewis decided that Jesus was God's son.⁶

Once Lewis came to his Christian faith, he became, as Father Walter Hooper would write, "the most thoroughly converted man I ever met." Lewis held his faith dearly throughout the rest of his life until his death from kidney problems on November 22, 1963.

Once Lewis became a Christian, his writings took a new turn. Lewis began writing, not just the academic works of his expertise, but many Christian works as well. This will serve as a good place to begin our discussion of some of those works.

⁵ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (1955).

⁶ This happened while on a trip to the zoo with his brother. As Lewis would later write, "When we set out, I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo, I did." *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955) at 237.

MERE CHRISTIANITY

During World War II, at a time when England's best were dying on fields of battle in Europe defending their homeland, the British Broadcasting System asked Lewis to come onto the radios of England and speak of his Christian faith. Lewis did so in broadcasts that he later put into writing. Lewis then published those writings as four sections or books under one binding and title: *Mere Christianity*.

Lewis's purpose was not to persuade anyone to choose a particular denomination or branch of Christianity ("I offer no help to anyone who is hesitating between two Christian 'denominations'. You will not learn from me whether you ought to become an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Roman Catholic."⁷). Instead, Lewis sought to "explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times,"⁸ what Lewis termed "mere Christianity."

Lewis likened his lectures/book to a "hall out of which doors open into several rooms." Lewis's goal was to bring people into that hall. That is not to say that Lewis thought anyone should be satisfied with mere Christianity. If the doors opened from the hall into rooms that were, in his illustrations, a variety of churches, Lewis was quick to point out, "it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals." The hall was "a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in."

The first of the four books within *Mere Christianity* is entitled: "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe." In this book, Lewis sets out the principles corresponding to the Law of Nature. By Law of Nature, Lewis referenced the law or understanding that people inherently knew naturally. It was a common set of right and wrong principles that, with few exceptions, crossed civilizations and cultures. For Lewis, one might argue differences in morality, but that there are core moral principles that transcend teachings of Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks, Romans, and most any other culture in any age.

Lewis then posited that, unlike the laws of gravity and other biological or physical laws, no one really keeps the Law of Nature. No one, in any place or time, lives up to the internal moral code 100 percent.

These were the two overriding principles:

⁷ *Mere Christianity*, Preface.

⁸ *Ibid.*

First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave a certain way...Secondly, that they do not in fact behave that way. They know the law of nature; they break it.⁹

After dealing with objections some might lodge to his principles, Lewis seeks to understand why this is true. What does this tell us about the universe we live in? Lewis explains that it provides support for the view that there is some driving force similar to a mind that is behind the universe. That does not necessarily mean the God of Christian theology, but there must be “a Something which is directing the universe, and which appears in me as a law urging me to do right and making me feel responsible and uncomfortable when I do wrong.”¹⁰

In the second book within *Mere Christianity*, Lewis probes the core beliefs of Christians. Lewis notes that atheists must believe that all the earth’s religions that teach of God (whether Christian or otherwise) are wrong. Christianity does not mean all are wrong. In fact a grain of truth could easily be found in each. Christianity does believe in a God that is “quite definitely ‘good’ or ‘righteous,’ a God who takes sides, who loves love and hates hatred, who wants us to behave in one way and not another.”¹¹ This is contrasted with the pantheist view that God is beyond good and evil.¹²

Lewis believed atheism a “boys’ philosophy.” It was too simple. It did not account for morality and the sense of right and wrong. Similarly, Lewis rejected a Christian faith that refused to address the difficult questions about sin, Hell, the devil, and redemption. Lewis saw two legitimate options to the world’s problems. One was that we live in “a good world that has gone wrong, but still retains the memory of what it ought to have been.”¹³ The second view was dualism, the belief of two equal and opposite powers at war. Lewis then charts through his reasons for adopting the first option over the dualistic one. Lewis explains the world as one inhabited by a dark force at work, but not one of equal power to the light, to God.

⁹ *Mere Christianity*, (Harper Collins edition 2001) at 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* at 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.* at 36.

¹² Lewis termed this pantheist view, “damned nonsense,” footnoting that while some may object to “damned” as frivolous swearing, Lewis means it literally. “I mean exactly what I say – nonsense that is *damned* is under God’s curse, and will ... lead those who believe it to eternal death.” *Ibid.* at 37.

¹³ *Ibid.* at 42.

Lewis notes that the dark force has robbed the world of its original make up and purpose. Mankind, through exercise of free will, became a part of the darkness, even though man was created for better. God then, in his mercy, came to right the wrong. Through Jesus, God sought to resolve the results of sin not humanity. Jesus came and proclaimed an ability to forgive sins. To Lewis, Jesus must:

Either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would 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 let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.¹⁴

Lewis then discusses the atonement, noting that in Christ, God has set us aright and given us a fresh start. No one will understand fully the why's and how's of that, but there are good starts to those questions. Moreover, one need not fully understand why something works to appreciate the fact it does work! This is Lewis's Christian conclusion: that in the perfection, surrender, and humiliation of Christ ("perfect because He was God, surrender and humiliation because He was man"¹⁵), we somehow share. Sharing in that, we share also in His victory over death and the human condition. This also renders the Christian in a position to change the way he lives and seek greater holiness through communion with God.

Book three of Lewis's *Mere Christianity* deals with morality, ethics, and Christian behavior. While Lewis deals with a good bit of material here, he purposely avoids a number of issues. As Lewis puts it:

Ever since I served as an infantryman in the First World War, I have had a great dislike of people who, themselves in ease and safety, issue exhortations to men in the frontline. As a result I have a reluctance to say much about temptations to which I myself am not exposed.¹⁶

Lewis closes *Mere Christianity* with Book Four where he discusses the Trinity and takes the reader into a bit more "theology."

¹⁴ *Ibid.* at 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* at 60.

¹⁶ *Mere Christianity*, preface.

CHRONICLES OF NARNIA

These seven well-known children's books are actually quite loved and appreciated by people of all ages. Lewis wrote them over a five-year period and through them allegorizes many Christian principles and ideas.

The adventures center on two brothers and two sisters who are magically transported into the land of Narnia, where animals talk, and magic is fairly common. Time passes differently in Narnia and while the children are gone for a very brief moment in earth's time, they spend virtual lifetimes in Narnia.

The time spent in Narnia has the children battling evil, both in internal struggles as well as with external forces. Each book contains a different time period in the development of Narnia. Over the course of the seven books, Narnia is explored from its creation as a land until the consummation of its history and the end of days.

While the books should be read and enjoyed, we pull out portions to illustrate the wit and style of Lewis's writing and one section to explore the power of his imagery that hammers home Christian lessons. In the third book,¹⁷ *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis tells the tale of a young boy whom was truly a pain to be around. He had no friends, was mean to animals, and was both bossy and a bully. In introducing him, Lewis gets the message across with one simple line:

There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.

This same book conveys some of Lewis's best teaching story lines. One of my favorites is the story of the dufflepuds. "Dufflepuds" were little one legged, one footed creatures that were incredibly dumb (though they thought themselves brilliant) and spent their lives in the service of a Magician. It is readily apparent that Lewis intends us to see a bit of us humans in the dufflepuds and God in the Magician.

The Magician set the duffers (their nickname) to "mind the garden and raise food." The duffers imagined that they had to do so because the magician was a cruel

¹⁷ The books were written and published as (1) *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950); (2) *Prince Caspian* (1951); (3) *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952); (4) *The Silver Chair* (1953); (5) *The Horse and His Boy* (1954); (6) *The Magician's Nephew* (1955); and (7) *The Last Battle* (1956). To order the books in terms of their time of occurrence, as opposed to the time they were written, *The Magician's Nephew* would be first, followed by *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; *The Horse and His Boy*; *Prince Caspian*; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*; *The Silver Chair*; and *The Last Battle*. Publishers issue them in both orders.

tyrant, when in fact he set them to the chore so they could eat! To help water the garden, the Magician had a stream flowing right by the garden. The stream was fed from a spring a ½ mile away. The Magician told the duffers to get their water for their garden from the stream, but the duffers “refused point blank.” Instead, the duffers insisted the Magician was trying to trick them, they knew better, and they insisted on trudging the half mile to the spring two or three times a day hauling water back in buckets that would splash half the water out as they hopped the distance.

Lewis writes it in a way where we readily see ourselves, even though it is a bit embarrassing. God has truly set up his laws and rules for our good, not for His, and yet how often do we deliberately choose to disobey? It is really nonsensical on our parts in light of who He is and what He has said, but we act as if we know better!

The Chronicles have sold over 100 million copies in over 40 languages. Lewis wrote them borrowing from his early childhood ideas of talking animals, as well as from Greek and Norse mythology. A literary group in Oxford, which met regularly to discuss their works, also no doubt influenced Lewis. This group, called the Inklings, included J.R. R. Tolkien (of Hobbit fame), Charles Williams (who wrote contemporary fantasies that T. S. Eliot would term “supernatural thrillers”); and Roger Green (who retold myths and King Arthur stories for children).

SPACE TRILOGY

Lewis wrote this set of three books to address the dehumanizing trends that Tolkien and Lewis discussed in current science fiction works. Tolkien also started a novel to address the same subject, although he never completed it.

The stories are riveting and set out a story line around a man named Ransom, a character based, at least in part, on Tolkien himself. The second book in the series, *Perelandra*, has a Garden of Eden account on another planet where Eve does not so easily succumb to Satan’s temptations.

In the Garden of Eden equivalent, Ransom has a chance to pick a piece of low growing fruit from among many hanging nearby. The taste is beyond all imaginations. Lewis notes, “For one draught of this on earth wars would be fought and nations betrayed.” The temptation for Ransom comes after the consumption. Lewis writes:

As he let the empty gourd fall from his hand and was about to pluck a second one, it came into his head that he was now neither hungry nor

thirsty. And yet to repeat a pleasure so intense and almost spiritual seemed an obvious thing to do. His reason, or what we commonly take to be reason in our own world, was all in favour of tasting this miracle again... Yet something seemed opposed to this “reason.”

Ransom then confronts the personal challenge of wanting something, not out of need or propriety, but simple greed.

This passage reminds one of Lewis’s views of sin. Lewis saw sin not so much as a “thing,” but more as a wrong choice. For example, eating itself is appropriate, and yet eating in excess is gluttony and a sin.¹⁸

THE GREAT DIVORCE

This fictional Lewis work is one of his finest. The book conveys the story of people who have died and are on train rides to their eternal destiny. The people arrive in “grey town” which is grim and basically dead. The people take buses and venture to the foothills of heaven, however, most choose to go back to the grey town, making lame excuses for not wanting something better.

Some believe it teaches a doctrine of Purgatory, others note that taken as a strict allegory, the story line does not really line up with any known church doctrine on the after life. We suggest that Lewis is not trying to teach afterlife doctrine. He is trying to convey a wake-up call to those still alive to understand the impact of their actions on earth.

Ultimately, Lewis wakes up from the story line, in a bold borrowing of Pilgrim’s Progress (see Lesson 82) and discovers that the whole story was a dream.

THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

This book was written in 1940 and is Lewis’s intellectual answer to questions about suffering. Lewis addresses how a loving and all-powerful God can be consistent with a world where people suffer.

¹⁸ In his *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, Lewis wrote, “Every sin is the distortion of an energy breathed into us—an energy which, if not thus distorted, would have blossomed into one of those holy acts whereof “God did it” and “I did it” are both true descriptions. We poison the wine as He decants it into us; murder a melody He would play with us as the instrument. We caricature the self-portrait He would paint. Hence all sin, whatever else it is, is sacrilege.”

A GRIEF OBSERVED

Lewis wrote this book after the loss of his wife. Lewis had always figured himself a bachelor for life, but late in life he met an American Jewish writer named Joy Davidman Gresham. Joy had written Lewis after a theological journey very similar to his. Joy had come from atheism to theism and finally to Christianity. Having divorced her husband, Joy moved to England settling first in London and then Oxford. Her correspondence with Lewis became a friendship. From there, the two married and developed an intense love.

From even before the marriage, it was clear that Joy had cancer that was life threatening. Still, Lewis sought marriage and Rev. Peter Bide performed a church marriage for the two at Joy's hospital bedside in 1956.

The cancer had a brief remission, but came back with a vengeance. Joy died in 1960. Lewis's grief was palpable. Lewis found that journaling through his grief was integral to his own survival. Lewis ultimately published his journaling under the title, *A Grief Observed*, although he did so under a pseudonym instead of his own name. He actually published the first edition as N. W. Clerk. After repeated friends suggested that Lewis read the book to assist him with his grief, Lewis finally came forward and admitted writing it.

THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS

In 1942, Lewis published this unique work of fiction. It centers on spiritual warfare. The book is a collection of letters from a senior demon named Screwtape written to his nephew Wormwood. Wormwood is trying to secure the damnation of his "patient" on earth, and the elder Screwtape writes his advice.

The book gives a good explanation of many of the approaches that Satan uses to drive people from God. For example, in chapter 10, Screwtape commends Wormwood on seeing that the patient has made "some very desirable new acquaintances." The new friends "are just the sort of people we want him to know—rich, smart, superficially intellectual, and brightly skeptical about everything in the world." Screwtape teaches his junior that hopefully the patient will assume "all sorts of cynical and skeptical attitudes which are not really his."

Consider this advice the Older Demon gives his nephew:

It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing.

Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the

safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts (Ch. 12).

Why is that so? Because as Screwtape explained two chapters earlier (9), “A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all – and more amusing.”

At the end of the story.... Awww, go read it. This is church history literacy, not a place to spoil endings!

MIRACLES

This is another of Lewis’s theological books. Lewis discusses the idea of miracles as occurrences of God (the super nature) intervening in nature. By definition, such is a supernatural occurrence. Lewis explains one can divide the intervention into two separate approaches. First, God can intervene by weaving nature together in such a way as to ensure a certain result. We might call that “providence” but it is no less a miracle, because it is the hand of God, the Super nature, intervening into nature. Secondly, God can choose to intervene in nature in a bold way that has no past, but once the intervention occurs, nature is altered. This is a miracle on the order of the virgin birth. God, the Super Nature has intervened in Nature and altered it entirely independently of history.

Lewis has written many other books that touch on many subjects: theology, mythology, philosophy, linguistics, fiction, and more. This list should give everyone a good start of where to read for one’s own edification. So now, points for home!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. God is real. He is the same “yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). We may know Him; we may not know Him. But that doesn’t change who he is. How do we know? The evidence of God is truly around us and within us. “Men are without excuse” because “God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom. 1:20). It is not merely the ignorant and the superstitious that believe. Men and women of great intellect have concluded that faith in God, and Jesus as Christ is both reasonable and compelling. These people are worth reading carefully. There is no greater issue for humanity than answering the questions, why are we here and who are we?

2. From the life of C.S. Lewis, I think it worth the inspiring point that as God goes about transforming us “by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2), we find that we are able to take the things in our life, put them to God’s use, and see amazing results. Did Lewis have exceptional talents? Of course, but what made his talents so profound was its dedication to God. As we dedicate our talents, whether they are inherently profound or simple, we put into play the tools that God specified for us to do the works he set before us. Hence the wisdom in Ecclesiastes 9:10, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” Could we ever wish for more? Should we not seek to serve God in this way?

3. There are many ways we can learn from others. We learn by example. We also learn through study. Paul was able to urge the Philippians Christians to “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you” (Phil. 3:17). So, grab some C. S. Lewis. Read it! Share it with others! It sure beats hanging around with the “sort of people” Satan would have us learn from! As Paul warned the Corinthians, “Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character” (1 Cor. 15:33).