
C. S. Lewis (1900–1963)

INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

C. S. Lewis will be remembered as one of the most important Christian thinkers of the twentieth century. He was born in Ireland in 1900, and the major part of his adult years was spent as a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, where he taught medieval literature. It was in 1931 that he was “surprised by joy,” Lewis’s own description of his conversion to Christianity. A brilliant scholar and writer, Lewis used his talents to reach thousands through the printed and spoken word.

He and a group of friends (including J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *Lord of the Rings*) gathered once a week to share their writings. During those years Lewis produced his famous work *The Screwtape Letters*. In the early 1940s he delivered talks on various Christian topics over British radio. His fame grew throughout Great Britain and spread to the United States. Out of those talks came the book *Mere Christianity*, a penetrating work on Christian apologetics. Countless Christians point to this book as an essential part of their faith journey. If sales are an indication of popularity, then C. S. Lewis—even thirty years after his death—is one of the most popular Christian thinkers of the twentieth century. In the following passage Lewis discusses the question, Is Christianity hard or easy?

EXCERPTS FROM *MERE CHRISTIANITY*

1. How Much of Myself Must I Give?

The ordinary idea which we all have before we become Christians is this. We take as the starting point our ordinary self with its various desires and interests. We then admit that something else—call it “morality” or “decent behavior,” or “the good of society”—has claims on this self: claims which interfere with its own desires. What we mean by “being good” is giving in to those claims. Some of the things the ordinary self wanted to do turn out to be what

we call “wrong”: well, we must give them up. Other things turn out to be what we call “right”: well, we shall have to do them.

But we are hoping all the time that when all the demands have been met, the poor natural self will still have some chance, and some time, to get on with its own life and do what it likes. In fact, we are very like an honest man paying his taxes. He pays them all right, but he does hope that there will be enough left over

for him to live on. Because we are still taking our natural self as the starting point.

2. Two Results

As long as we are thinking that way, one or the other of two results is likely to follow. Either we give up trying to be good, or else we become very unhappy indeed. For, make no mistake: if you are really going to try to meet all the demands made on the natural self, it will not have enough left over to live on. The more you obey your conscience, the more your conscience will demand of you. And your natural self, which is thus being starved and hampered and worried at every turn, will get angrier and angrier.

In the end, you will either give up trying to be good, or else become one of those people who, as they say, "live for others" but always in a discontented, grumbling way—always wondering why the others do not notice it more and always making a martyr of yourself. And once you have become that you will be a far greater pest to anyone who has to live with you than you would have been if you had remained frankly selfish.

3. Harder and Easier

The Christian way is different: harder, and easier. Christ says, "Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will

give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours."

Both harder and easier than what we are all trying to do. You have noticed, I expect, that Christ Himself sometimes describes the Christian way as very hard, sometimes as very easy. He says, "Take up your Cross"—in other words, it is 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. And one can just see why both are true.

4. The Most Dangerous Thing

Teachers will tell you that the laziest boy in the class is the one who works the hardest in the end. They mean this. If you give two boys, say, a proposition in geometry to do, the one who is prepared to take trouble will try to understand it. The lazy boy will learn it by heart because, for the moment, that needs less effort. But six months later, when they are preparing for the exam, that lazy boy is doing hours and hours of miserable drudgery over things the other boy understands, and positively enjoys, in a few minutes.

Laziness means more work in the long run. Or look at it this way. In a battle, or in mountain climbing, there is often one thing which it takes a lot of pluck to do; but it is also, in the long run, the safest thing to do. If you funk it, you will find yourself, hours later, in far worse danger. The cowardly thing is also the most dangerous thing.

5. The Almost Impossible Thing

It is like that here. The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are

trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call "ourselves," to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be "good." We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way—centered on money or pleasure or ambition—and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly.

And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. As He said, a thistle cannot produce figs. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass-seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short: but I shall still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be ploughed up and re-sown.

6. Listening to That Other Voice

That is why the real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind.

We can only do it for moments at first. But from those moments the new sort of life will be spreading through our system: because now we are letting Him work at the right part of us. It is the difference between paint, which is merely laid on the surface, and a dye or stain which soaks right through.

He never talked vague, idealistic gas. When He said, "Be perfect," He meant it. He

meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder—in fact, it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.

7. The Reason the Church Exists

May I come back to what I said before? This is the whole of Christianity. There is nothing else. It is so easy to get muddled about that. It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects—education, building, missions, holding services. Just as it is easy to think the State has a lot of different objects—military, political, economic, and what not.

But in a way things are much simpler than that. The State exists simply to promote and to protect the ordinary happiness of human beings in this life. A husband and wife chatting over a fire, a couple of friends having a game of darts in a pub, a man reading a book in his own room or digging in his own garden—that is what the State is there for. And unless they are helping to increase and prolong and protect such moments, all the laws, parliaments, armies, courts, police, economics, etc., are simply a waste of time.

In the same way the Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose. It says in the Bible that the whole universe

was made for Christ and that everything is to be gathered together in Him.

8. Becoming a Part of the Plan

I do not suppose any of us can understand how this will happen as regards the whole universe. We do not know what (if anything) lives in the parts of it that are millions of miles from this Earth. Even on this Earth we do not know how it applies to things other than men. After all, that is what you would expect. We have been

shown the plan only in so far as it concerns ourselves.

What we have been told is how we can be drawn into Christ—can become part of that wonderful present which the young Prince of the universe wants to offer his Father—that present which is Himself and therefore us in Him. It is the only thing we were made for. And there are strange, exciting hints in the Bible that when we are drawn in, a great many other things in Nature will begin to come right. The bad dream will be over: it will be morning.

BIBLE SELECTION: LUKE 14:25–33

²⁵Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him,

³⁰saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be used for discussion within a small group, or used for journal reflections by individuals.

1. C. S. Lewis stresses the need to give all areas of our lives to God. What do you find most difficult about giving all to God?
2. Describe how you would feel if Jesus came to you and spoke the words Lewis quotes in section 3 (“Christ says, ‘Give me All. I don’t want . . .’”).
- ③ According to Lewis, the hardest road we can take in life is the one that appears the easiest (e.g., the boy who waits until the end of the semester to cram for a test). How have your experiences confirmed or denied his claim?

4. The pursuit of personal happiness by being morally good, says Lewis, ends in frustration. What is his reasoning behind this? Do you agree or disagree?
5. In Luke 14:25–33, Jesus encourages those who would follow him to “count the cost” of being one of his disciples. What has being a Christian cost you?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

The following exercises can be done by individuals, shared between spiritual friends, or used in the context of a small group. Choose one or more of the following.

1. Use a journal this week to reflect on one or more of the following questions:
 - a. What are some of the reasons I fear giving my life completely to God?
 - b. Which areas of my life am I most reluctant to surrender to God?
 - c. In what ways have I experienced the heavy burden of trying to remain in control of my life?
2. C. S. Lewis believes that the way to a surrendered life begins each morning. This week make a conscious effort to push back the clamoring voice of your natural self as soon as you awaken, and, instead, give ear to God, letting him guide and direct your every thought and word. Put three-by-five-inch cards next to your bed and over your bathroom mirror that read, “To whom am I listening?” or “Who’s in control?” This will help you begin the day with a peaceful attitude of surrender.

REFLECTIONS

The contrast between God’s way of doing things and our way is never more acute than in this area of human change and transformation. We focus on specific actions; God focuses on us. We work from the outside in; God works from the inside out. We try; God transforms.

Jim Smith, my co-worker in these devotional readings, has been greatly helped by the many writings of C. S. Lewis and by this passage in particular. He writes, “When I read this essay, I was brought to my knees. I could hardly finish it. I suddenly knew what was wrong: I had been using my ‘natural self’ as the starting point. I had been trying to keep my self and its desires intact. Christ was merely an addition to my self. After reading this selection, I resolved to live each day consciously listening to the voice of Christ and letting the new self—the one that Christ gives me—come to life.”

May God use this reading to do the same for you and for me.



GOING DEEPER

- Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. New York: Macmillan, 1953. A collection of seven stories that both delight and instruct. They are wonderful stories to read out loud to your children so that both parent and child can learn and profit from them.
- Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan, 1952. A gathering together of three separate series of radio talks: "The Case for Christianity," "Christian Behavior," and "Beyond Personality." This book is a masterful defense of the Christian way. It is must reading.
- Lewis, C. S. *Reflections on the Psalms*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958. Provides insights and deals with problems in the devotional reading of the Psalms.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Screwtape Letters*. New York: Macmillan, 1980. Counsels of a senior devil to a junior devil in the art of temptation. The book contains wonderful insights into the life of faith.
- Lewis, C. S. *Space Trilogy*. New York: Macmillan, 1965. Consisting of three volumes, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*, these books in the science fiction genre are packed with wisdom, theological insight, and great adventure.
- Lewis, C. S. *Surprised by Joy*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955. The story of Lewis's conversion from atheism to Christianity.