

THE SOUL OF C. S. LEWIS

A Meditative Journey through Twenty-Six of His Best-Loved Writings

Written and edited by

WAYNE MARTINDALE,
JERRY ROOT, AND
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The Soul of C. S. Lewis: A Meditative Journey through Twenty-Six of His Best-Loved Writings

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Introduction

JOHN GODFREY SAXE WROTE A POEM about six blind men who encounter an elephant. They have heard of elephants, but their blindness has kept them from ever seeing one.

The first man grabs a leg and says, “An elephant is like a tree trunk.”

The next feels the side of the elephant and says, “No, an elephant is like a wall.”

Another, holding onto the tail, exclaims, “An elephant is like a rope.”

Another still, holding the ear, says the elephant is like a very large fan; the fifth, grasping the tusk, says the elephant’s like a spear. The last man, holding onto the trunk, declares the elephant’s like a giant snake.

Of course, each has an accurate experience of the elephant, but no one has a complete experience of the elephant. To enlarge their individual understanding, each of the men must trust that the others are neither liars nor imbeciles, even though his own experience seems to contradict those of the others. An attempt to enter into the wider experience of the others with empathy and a teachable heart will reveal complexities that increase perspective and add to a larger and growing understanding.

The Soul of C. S. Lewis: A Meditative Journey through Twenty-Six of His Best-Loved Writings is an attempt to gain a wider grasp of the world and life experience. It is primarily a book of reflections building on quotations from C. S. Lewis and connecting each to Scripture passages.

What value does such a book have?

ENCOURAGING REFLECTION ON C. S. LEWIS’S THOUGHTS

Lewis’s literary output has benefited readers all over the world. His clarity of expression and power of depiction have allowed him to speak to deep human needs and bring understanding to life’s complexities. This book encourages a closer read of his ideas. The quotations within have been chosen from a wide range of his books, and a select group of writers have added their own reflections on them. These are not last words but rather

models, helpful stimulants nudging readers to explore more deeply and apply more widely the wisdom and insight within each quotation. The writers are very familiar with Lewis's work, and their voices are united by a singular devotion to God and a passionate love for him that they desired to express in words. Their reflections give a vocabulary for quests of the mind as well as feelings of the heart.

C. S. Lewis wrote that “reality is iconoclastic”—that is, it is idol-breaking. At any given time, we may acquire a good image of God from a book, a sermon, or a conversation with friends. Yet the once-helpful image of a moment, if clutched too tenaciously, will begin to compete against the possibility of our having a healthy, growing understanding of God. In order to develop vitality in our faith and to gain a better grasp of who God is, we would be wise to reflect on our current conceptions lest we become idolaters, worshiping a notion of God rather than God himself.

Theology is not God; it is simply—and hopefully—the best idea we can have of him at any given moment. Vital faith is growing faith, full of thought and meditation. Challenges to any belief we hold will reveal the resiliency of true faith, which stands up to scrutiny. Of course, some challenges will require us to jettison prejudices once held as truth. That is part of growth. On the other hand, appropriate defense or modification of beliefs we hold will lead to a more robust and dynamic knowledge of God. We each have biases influenced by our age, culture, language, fears, and insecurities. To break out of the dungeon of a narrow perspective, we would do well to listen to the voices of others, relax our suspicions, and truly hear what they are saying.

In *The Soul of C. S. Lewis*—whether in the quotations of Lewis or the reflections on what he wrote—you will see the good intentions of flawed human beings whose meditations reveal a primary desire to love and serve God, following him as best as each is able. Hopefully, this will encourage the reader to increase his or her devotion to God and reading of his Word in a way that is honest and dynamic.

HIGHLIGHTING THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF SCRIPTURE AND LIFE

The Bible is a book for all time, the ultimate book for every age. The wisdom that inspired it anticipated the unique questions and challenges of each generation. God gave a book that would potentially equip all individuals and cultures to successfully navigate any rough waters they might

experience; in fact, tragedies often come from neglecting its wisdom. No human interpreter of Scripture could ever fully mine its riches; nevertheless, there are some whose gifts of observation and clarification can be a source of great benefit. C. S. Lewis was such a person, and for a variety of reasons he makes a good guide for others.

First, Lewis's vision of life does much to encourage a worldview that is integrated and harmonized, reflecting life as it is truly lived, with all its complexity and rich texture.

Second, Lewis's insights help to widen the horizons of his readers. He would not allow his readers to cram human experience into the cramped space of compartmentalized or formulaic thinking. His God and the universe made by God are too big for such arrogance. Consequently, Lewis prodded his readers to look at the world with a sense of continual wonder, awe, and worship. Again, though there are no last words, this does not mean there are no *sure* words. Lewis was no relativist; he realized that truth can be discovered and known even though no one will ever explore it fully. God's truth never changes, but like his mercies—which are new every morning (see Lamentations 3:23)—something new of the height and depth and width of his truth can also be experienced in a fresh way.

We can think of faith as a tree, which does not give up its interior rings as it adds new ones; so, too, a vibrant faith will be a growing, dynamic faith. Core beliefs do not have to be abandoned while one assimilates a more robust understanding. Or we can think of growth in the knowledge of God like emerging concentric circles: if one looks inward at the knowledge acquired at any given moment, the increases could result in unhealthy pride. But if one looks out from the growing perimeter of what is known, this will always reveal—in greater and greater proportion—how much there is beyond our present knowledge that we know virtually nothing about. This should encourage us to live lives of reflection and produce in each of us a sense of wonder and awe.

Third, Lewis is a good guide because he was aware of his own fallenness and need for grace and mercy. The idea of human dignity was never far from his mind, nor was the idea of human depravity. Consequently, there was in Lewis a profound sense of his weakness and need. This, too, is a good model for anyone who wants realistic benefit from a life of contemplation.

KNOWING MORE OF GOD: TAKING ADVANTAGE OF LEWIS'S VARIETY

The Soul of C. S. Lewis: A Meditative Journey through Twenty-Six of His Best-Loved Writings draws inspiration from both Lewis's fiction and his non-fiction. Lewis was always the rhetorician: he wrote to persuade. He had a vision of life that was very God-centered. This being so, he recognized that the presence as well as the purpose of God were embedded in the very fiber of the universe. Consequently, the world as one encounters it day after day is far more complex than any explanation. The best descriptions would seek understanding from a variety of perspectives, and Lewis's richly diverse fictional and nonfictional forms provide different ways of seeing the world.

Lewis's descriptions and definitions are clear. His vocabulary and background with languages enabled him to be precise, minimizing ambiguity. Nevertheless, some things cannot be reduced to mere definition or be fully grasped by a propositional statement. In fact, the word *definition* literally means, "of the finite." We define things by virtue of their limitation and their function. It is finitude that makes definitions possible; a thing must be small enough to wrap words around it so as to distinguish it from other things if it is to be defined.

The question then arises, How do we define God? If he is infinite, then he defies simplistic and limited description. Even Jesus, speaking of the Kingdom of Heaven, proclaimed that "the Kingdom of Heaven is *like . . .*" (Matthew 13:24, italics added). He resorted to the use of similes and other figures of speech, parables, and stories. In other words, the most robust attempts to understand the character and nature of God will use a variety of modes of expression. Lewis wrote in over a dozen genres, employing both fiction and nonfiction to make his point. The reflections in this book seek to draw on the kind of breadth used by Lewis in the hopes that it will aid the reader's growth in the knowledge of God.

But there is another reason for including Lewis's fiction, in particular, in these reflections: Lewis himself was well aware that reason has its own weaknesses. If someone makes a bad decision or a questionable moral choice, reason is not so quick to challenge the choice and call the individual to repentance. It is more likely that reason will be marshaled by the will to make a host of rationalizations and excuses for the bad choice. Consequently, bad moral choices can lead to intellectual blindness; cleverness is no synonym for ethical clarity. The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 1:18 that "wicked people . . . suppress the truth by their wickedness." Lewis recognized that

reason, having been employed to justify a bad choice, will stand like a dragon guarding access to the heart, thus keeping one's understanding darkened. Sometimes story alone makes it possible to get past a watchful dragon. The Scriptures themselves bear witness to this truth, for when Nathan the prophet had to confront King David about his sin (see 2 Samuel 12), he used story to do it. He knew the king was likely to resist an outright declaration of his wrongdoing. But the prophetic word, recast in a story, hit the target.

Each of us has certain blind spots we are likely to guard with rationalizations. Hopefully these reflections, using Lewis's nonfiction as well as his fiction, will penetrate deep into the soul of the reader.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REFLECTION

Why is reflection so important? Because the nonreflective person is at risk and will likely prove troublesome to those around him. This cannot be too heavily underscored. Each of us has embedded weaknesses that, without reflection, can remain hidden from us until life's circumstances squeeze them out like toothpaste from the tube. Undoubtedly, awareness of human weakness led Socrates to remark in the *Apology* that the unexamined life is not worth living. Perhaps a cautionary tale will highlight the dangers of a nonreflective life.

Herodotus, a Greek historian, tells a particularly applicable story, later retold in Plato's *Republic*. It is the story of Gyges, a Greek shepherd in the ancient city-state of Lydia. One day while tending his flock, Gyges endured an earthquake that opened a fissure in the ground before him. Curiosity drove him to investigate, and to his surprise, he found a body in a cavern below. Noticing a gold ring on the hand of the corpse, Gyges took the ring and fled. Another earthquake occurred and closed up the fissure. That night, gathered with other shepherds, Gyges ate his dinner around an open fire. Looking at the ring, he gave it a nervous twist, after which he heard the other shepherds exclaim, "What happened to Gyges? He was here among us only a moment ago and now he is gone!" Quickly, Gyges gave the ring another twist only to hear the shepherds declare, "Oh, Gyges, there you are! How is it that you were able to depart from us and return to our midst so quickly and without detection?" From this Gyges realized the ring was magic and gave its wearer the power of invisibility. With this power Gyges seduced the queen, killed the king, and set himself up as the ruler of Lydia.

American philosopher Mortimer Adler used this story while teaching. After telling the story, he would ask his students to reflect on it. If they had the opportunity to buy this ring, would they do it? And if they bought

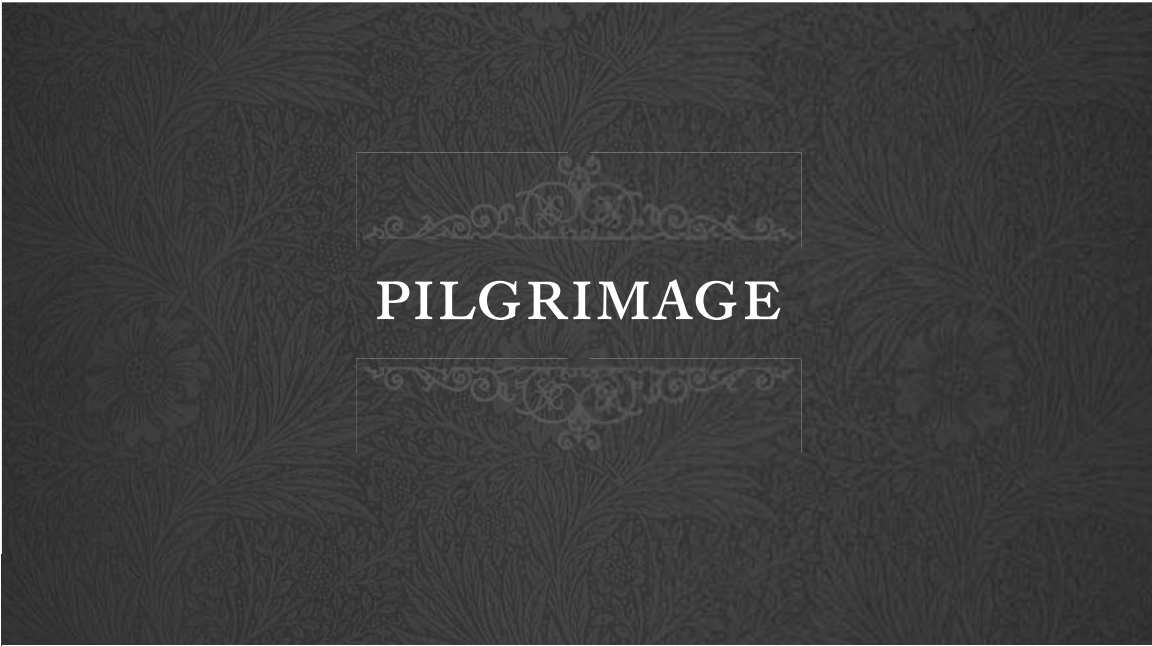
it, how would they use it? Reflection reveals that such power in the hands of mere mortals will inevitably corrupt. Of course, elements of the idea that unbridled power is likely to corrupt is a common theme. Its conveyance through a ring of invisibility is masterfully woven into the narrative of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, a story Tolkien read to his friend C. S. Lewis as he wrote it. Elements of the story of Gyges also appear in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and in many other stories as well—including Lewis's own magic rings concept within the Narnian Chronicles. Writers throughout history have reflected on man's corruptibility. Very little imagination needs to be employed before realizing that each of us will possess many "rings of Gyges" throughout the course of a lifetime.

Every act of will, every choice we make carries an expression of the power to assert ourselves in ways that can move us one step, in a lifetime of steps, toward the corruption of our character or the positive development of it. Every decision carries in it a ring of Gyges.

THE SCHEME OF THE BOOK

The Soul of C. S. Lewis: A Meditative Journey through Twenty-Six of His Best-Loved Writings draws quotations from Lewis's writing. Limits of space as well as the authors' and editors' predilections narrowed the scope of these readings. Nevertheless, each of the twenty-four chapters of this book highlights a particular Lewis source (or two, in a few cases). Each chapter is introduced with a one-page summary; this is followed by ten Lewis quotations and ten reflections. Each reflection ends with a Scripture verse that affirms the concept from Lewis. The chapters are bundled in groups of six within a topic that loosely generalizes a theme running through each book in that part. The four parts of the book are Pilgrimage, Temptation and Triumph, Going Deeper, and Words of Grace. Each of these has an introduction explaining its general theme.

The purpose of *The Soul of C. S. Lewis* is to encourage reflection and thought. The selections are short; nevertheless, they are designed for the reader's personal growth. Lewis opened up more than just wardrobe doors. To read and reflect upon his work biblically is to take a journey of discovery. He opens a door into the liberal arts—those liberating arts that allow people to think well in order to live well. He leads them into new worlds of ideas and imaginative discoveries. Furthermore, Lewis integrates his faith into the learning process, and this, too, provides a significant model for a reader's own reflection.



One of the great themes in literature is that of pilgrimage, or quest. The great books of classical tradition reverberate with this theme—books such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, to name a few. Such works often feature people who are aware that they are on a journey through time and are moving toward a significant end, though that end may be unarticulated or unclear. The commonality of these sorts of books indicates that the human heart pulses with longing for a secret place: Christians believe that this is ultimately a longing for heaven and that our lives are a quest to find that which will satisfy the deepest longings of our souls. It seems as if men and women throughout time, and in whatever region of the globe, have sensed deeply that something is missing—and each one longs to find it. The pilgrim impulse causes some to leave the familiar to find satisfaction in the unknown. For others, long estranged from things familiar, this desire manifests itself in the pain of homesickness and the desire to look for missing pieces in places all but forgotten. Still others never leave the regions of their birth; nevertheless, they know the desperate ache of longing to be fulfilled.

C. S. Lewis seldom put pen to paper without hinting at this perpetual tug at his heart, if not writing about it explicitly. Perhaps one of the reasons for his lasting appeal and his wide reading audience is that his words “scratch where we itch” the most. We all know longing at some level, and we are all on a kind of quest to find our hearts’ deepest desires.

Like Lewis, French physicist and philosopher Blaise Pascal famously identified this longing as ultimately being a thirst for God. Pascal once wrote that there are only two kinds of reasonable people: those who seek for God because they do not know him and those who seek to know him better because they do. In the quotes and reflections found here under the topic Pilgrimage, it is the goal of the contributors to highlight this dominant theme in Lewis’s writing. These meditations, taking their inspiration

from Lewis, underscore the longing that ultimately nudges us toward fulfillment in Christ.

It is God who awakens desire in us, that through it he might woo us to himself. But as George MacDonald, a man Lewis regarded as an unofficial teacher of his, once noted, sometimes desire awakens us just enough to feel a woe. We are aware that we want to satisfy our hearts' desires, and we set out on our quest. We may find ourselves wandering many years before we begin to read the clues properly. It may be that we sense a longing like that of Abraham of old: we are on a quest for the City with foundations and whose architect and builder is God. This is the quest, or pilgrimage, for *place—in fact, for a particular place*. It is the longing for heaven. Another author who heavily influenced Lewis, his contemporary G. K. Chesterton, wrote that we are “homesick in our own homes.” Every time we lay our heads down on our pillows, we lay them down in a foreign land. St. Augustine said we are pilgrims in our own land; Peter wrote in the Bible that we are aliens and sojourners while in our earthly existence. And as the old gospel song declares, “This world is not our home; we’re just a-passing through.”

But C. S. Lewis reminds his readers that there are other kinds of longings as well. There is a longing that sets those who experience it on a pilgrimage for the *perfect relationship*. We all know what it is like to feel lonely; we long for community as much as the thirsty long for water, as much as the hungry long for food. Loneliness confirms the fact that we are sociological beings made for relationship. But isn't it also possible to feel lonely while living under the same roof with others we know and care for, others whom we know love and care for us? The fact that we can feel this kind of loneliness, too, does not prove anything; yet it may strongly suggest we were made for relationship no mere human can satisfy. This kind of longing also sets us on a pilgrimage to find our perfect mate; that is, to find ultimate, relational satisfaction in Christ.

Another kind of longing mentioned by Lewis is the longing to have fixed what is broken inside us. None of us live to the level of our own convictions. Each of us, when honest, must be aware of some level of deficiency. We might work hard to right an injustice in one quarter and yet rationalize that same injustice when doing it ourselves. This reveals that there is something not quite right within us, and in our best moments, we do so long to have all the broken bits mended once and for all. This

longing also sets our hearts on pilgrimage as we begin looking for someone to mend us and make us whole.

Lewis's books speak to his readers because they address something as common and yet profound as longing and the spiritual pilgrimage each finds himself or herself on. The readings in this section of the book speak generally to pilgrim longings and in this way address the pilgrim in each of us.

The Pilgrim's Regress

THE FIRST BOOK LEWIS WROTE after his conversion to Christianity was *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*. Lewis believed that the first problem in life is trying to fit reason and romantic longing together; that is, to fit the deepest aspirations of the heart with intellectual rigor. As a young man, Lewis believed that Christianity could not reconcile these competing parts of his life. In 1926 he published *Dymmer*, a narrative poem featuring a young man questing for the Real. His pilgrimage ends in tragedy. Even so, the questions that permeate this earlier work are also present in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, but in the latter Lewis was able to supply the answers he was beginning to find in his newly acquired Christian faith.

The Pilgrim's Regress is the story of a young boy named John, who is raised in a city called Puritania. The religion of his world is dominated by pretenses, superstitions, inconsistencies, and legalisms. One day John has a vision of an island far, far away. This vision awakens in his heart a deep sense of longing, which he thinks is for the island. In time John will learn that the object of this desire, though awakened by the island, is actually for something much greater. So he sets out on a quest to find his heart's desire.

The route he takes on his quest has mountains to the north: these mountains represent reason. To the south are swamps representing romanticism. John finds himself continually off track, drifting toward a rationalism that denies his heart's longing or else a romanticism that slips into swamps of subjectivism and sentimentality. It is not until he encounters a hermit who represents history that he is able to sort out his longings. And it is not until he encounters Mother Kirk, who represents the church, that he is finally able to reconcile his reason with his longing. In seeking the object of his desire, John works through what Lewis called the dialectic of desire. This refers to a process of tethering the heart to some object expecting fulfillment from it only to be disappointed, then moving on to some other object

and further disappointment. So, too, John tethers his heart to objects that only disappoint in the end. He longs for something greater than these objects, which can do little more than merely awaken his desire.

After his own conversion, Lewis noted that if we sense a desire that no earthly object can satisfy, that does not prove the world a fraud. Perhaps the things in this life only awaken the desire and set us on a pilgrimage till the true object of our deepest longing, which is God, is finally found. Lewis called this longing *joy*.

This book, Lewis's only allegory, is his first explicitly Christian book. It is also his first attempt at Christian apologetics, and it's worth noting that he uses fiction to make his point. Fiction was always part of Lewis's rhetoric when it came to apologetics. He knew that some things are more likely to be grasped with the imagination, and he wrote with this kind of appeal. Finally, it is important to remember that much, though not all, of *The Pilgrim's Regress* is autobiographical.

1 *It seemed to him that a mist which hung at the far end of the wood had parted for a moment, and through the rift he had seen a calm sea, and in the sea an island.* BOOK ONE, SEC. II, P. 8

The protagonist of *The Pilgrim's Regress* is a young man named John, who finds himself on a pilgrim quest. He has seen a vision of an island, and it set his heart to longing. But as we go on to learn, he only thinks it is the island that is the object of his desire, when in fact he longs for something far more important. Because the island became the occasion of his heart's awakening, it takes on special significance for him.

Longing is one of the most important of Lewis's themes. Its importance is not acknowledged merely because of the frequency with which Lewis writes about it but also because it speaks of something deep inside every man, woman, and child. Augustine observed that God made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him.

John's island stands for countless other possibilities. Lewis's reference to mists parting and to the revelation of the island is significant. Things may often go unnoticed until an almost mystical moment when they appear to us with utmost clarity. And with the clarity comes an awareness of realities beyond our reach. Anything might awaken longing in us, and it is easy to deceive ourselves that the thing that awakens desire is actually the thing desired. In fact, the things that teach our hearts to ache with longing are, by virtue of their mutability—their temporariness—unable to sustain the longing they awaken. These things are given to woo us *to* God, not to serve as replacements *for* God. They are things that moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal (see Matthew 6:19-20). Only God, the great lover of our souls, can satisfy us forever. Only God can awaken our hearts to long for him, and only in him will we not be disappointed. First loves, distant lands, dreams of the future—earthly objects will often raise expectations that they cannot satisfy. Only God has the capacity to satisfy forever.

You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever. PSALM 16:11

There is a common manner of speaking that should be characteristic of any sincere Christian: refusing to take the ideas of others seriously, choosing to dismiss others and calling them names rather than considering the content of their speech or the substance of their ideas. Lewis was particularly attuned to this problem and refuted it wherever he encountered it.

Who, after all, can really claim to know very much? Considering the number of books available in any given bookstore and the magnitude of information stored in those books, who could ever claim to be familiar with even a very small amount of this material? And considering how little any of us know, it is irresponsible to dismiss other people and relegate their ideas to mere categorization by names such as Puritan, Sensualist, Liberal, or Conservative. We must first hear someone's point of view and understand it. Then, if we disagree, we should use well-crafted arguments to show exactly why we disagree. If we cannot do this, we should simply remain quiet until we've learned enough to speak intelligently.

We are often too quick to dismiss those whose ideas are different from our own. Perhaps we lack the life skills necessary to listen patiently to the ideas of others. Perhaps we have not yet learned to treat all who are made in the image of God with the dignity that is due them. Perhaps we neglect to cultivate the kind of rigorous thinking necessary to engage in a fair-minded, lively debate. Nevertheless, an inability to hear and engage well with dissenting voices will guarantee that we stay stuck in our prejudices.

All Christians should be quick to acknowledge that we are pilgrims on this earth together—and nothing is more stifling to pilgrim longing than holding fast to one's prejudices. If we are sojourners, it is good for us to discover a world wider than our own experiences. If our views do not stand up to scrutiny, our position is not strengthened by simply calling those we disagree with unkind names. If our point of view is capable of standing up to those of others, we must begin by listening to what others say and then answer them with both reason and patience.

It is in honest debate, rather than name-calling, that we can measure the strength of our beliefs. Paul wisely warned Timothy to avoid conten-

tiousness, through gentleness and consideration for everyone. Rather than prejudice and unfair judgment of others, let us embrace honest engagement with others and so allow the confidence of our own faith to grow.

They must not slander anyone and must avoid quarreling. Instead, they should be gentle and show true humility to everyone. TITUS 3:2

3

"I would strongly advise you to take this turn. . . ."

"Where does it go to?" asked John suspiciously.

"It takes you back to the main road," said Reason.

BOOK FOUR, SEC. IV, P. 65

John's quest to find the island he has seen in a vision will actually turn out to be a pilgrimage to God, for the island has awakened in him a desire that cannot be fulfilled by any earthly object. Such objects can awaken this unquenchable desire; only God can satisfy it.

The journey takes John along a path with mountains to the north, which represent Reason, and swamps to the south, which represent Romanticism—a symbolic polarization reflecting Lewis's belief that the first problem in life is to find concord between the head and the heart. Often, John gets off track. If he vectors toward the mountains, he finds Reason rigid and lacking heart, and he drifts toward legalism. If he vectors toward the swamps, his heart drifts to sentimentalism and sensuality. He must stick to the main road in order to satisfy his deepest desire.

Lewis is making the point that John's story is the story of every man and woman. As the old hymn observes, each of us is "prone to wander." Our reason may fail us and our hearts lead us astray. Each of us can drift toward one of those forms of rationalization that become self-referential—a tendency to interpret all life from one's own perspective.

But to create one's own sense of reality, to spin justifications from ourselves, is to live like a spider within its web, using others and justifying our bad behavior. On the other hand, drifting toward heartfelt impulses that are unresponsive to good sense can also lead to self-referential behaviors that, in the end, hurt us or those around us.

When we vector away from God and lose our pilgrim way, we must find our way back. Confession of wrongdoing and a cry for mercy are always appropriate at such times to put us back on track. God loves us and wants us to come to him, to follow him with constancy. He knows the tendencies of our hearts to drift and our reason to rationalize. Even so, he seeks to woo us back to him.

If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. I JOHN 1:9

While John is on his pilgrimage, he learns of a great chasm that separates man from God. He is told that this chasm is called *Peccatum Adae*, which means “Sin of Adam.” This is a reference to the first sin—in other words, what some call the doctrine of original sin, which asserts that somehow, by virtue of the first sin ever committed, the whole human race is infected.

Some have wrongly assumed that the doctrine is an attempt to blame all men and women for the act of someone who lived a long, long time ago. Nothing can be further from the truth. If you are struggling with this idea, simply try to live a perfect life. Therein lies the problem: no one *can* live a perfect life. We all make mistakes; we all live inconsistently with our own convictions. The doctrine of original sin is one established not so much to project universal blame as to explain a universal phenomenon: that each of us tends to live in a manner that is inconsistent and troubling.

As G. K. Chesterton observed in his book *Orthodoxy*, this is the only theological doctrine that is empirically verifiable. In other words, history is full of examples. Perennial wars, genocides, human slave trafficking, corporate greediness, political abuse, and powermongering all testify to the unsavory truth that something has gone wrong with the species called humankind. But, though the pages of history are useful in showing examples of sin and regrettable acts, looking there may keep the idea of sin remote. In fact, an honest appraisal of our own hearts should be enough to supply plenty of evidence.

The doctrine of original sin is only man’s errant brushstroke across a wider canvas of God’s goodness and grace. Furthermore, God did not leave humanity marooned in its predicament. After all, awareness of one’s deep need to have mended what is broken inside is also an incentive for a pilgrimage. In Lewis’s allegory, John ultimately finds grace. So, too, we can find grace in Christ.

Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life. I CORINTHIANS 15:22

5 *All prayers always, taken at their word, blaspheme,
Invoking with frail imageries a folk-lore dream. . . .
Take not, oh Lord, our literal sense, but in thy great,
Unbroken speech our halting metaphor translate.*

BOOK EIGHT, SEC. IV, P. 139

No matter what we think about God, he is bigger and better than our biggest and best thoughts about him. This is a constant theme in Lewis's writings, and it is an important one for the Christian pilgrim to keep in mind. After hearing a sermon or reading a book or after deep conversations with friends, we may understand something about God we did not understand before. Pieces of the puzzle come together and our vision of God may expand significantly. Nevertheless, if we hold on to this vision of God too tightly, it will compete against a growing understanding: the image once helpful becomes an idol because God is far bigger than our best thoughts about him.

This idea of pursuing God as he is rather than how one might want him to be is one that appears often in literary history. Baron von Hügel, a philosopher of religion, wrote about levels of clarity, warning, "Beware of the first clarity; press on to the second clarity."¹ Similarly, Robert Browning wrote, "Then welcome each rebuff that turns earth's smoothness rough."² When we think we have everything figured out, our conception of the world is nice and smooth and round. But the world is not smooth; it has texture and complexity, peaks and valleys. As Augustine wrote, "The house of my soul is too small. Enlarge it, Lord, that you might enter in."³ And Stephen, accused of speaking against the Jerusalem Temple, told his accusers they could never contain God in a box.⁴ Like Stephen, Lewis also understood that God is big; he is always kicking out the walls of temples we build for him because he wants to give us more of himself.

God is greater than our best thoughts of him, than our best prayers. Lewis recognizes in this fact a source of encouragement to the spiritual pilgrim: no matter how far beneath God our best thoughts of him, no matter how feeble our prayers, he still accepts us and receives to himself those very thoughts and prayers, accepting us as we are.

"Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that?" asks the LORD. "Could you build me such a resting place? Didn't my hands make both heaven and earth?" ACTS 7:49-50

The word *allegory* comes from two Greek words: *allos*, which means “another of a same kind,” and *agora*, which means “marketplace.” This is where, for example, we get the word *agoraphobia*: fear of the marketplace. The book of Acts makes it clear that the apostle Paul’s pattern when coming to a city was to preach first in the synagogue and then in the *agora*. So, taking the two words together, an *allegory* is a story configured in such a way that one thing is told in a different “marketplace.” It provides a fresh way of looking at something and permits some things to be seen that might be missed if seen only from an old, familiar way.

In this particular allegory, Lewis’s pilgrim, John, comes to a hermit who represents history. This hermit, as history, is a person less likely to get riled and easily upset about the current commotion. He takes the long view of things and seeks to understand them in their proper context. He seeks to understand the complexities that feed into any given moment rather than rushing to ill-informed conclusions. The hermit also shows that history is the source of tradition and speaks with an authoritative voice.

G. K. Chesterton observed that two mistakes can be made about tradition. The first is to simply accept all things traditional as if they were a last word on what should be thought, said, or done. This view allows the past to trump the present and hinders any kind of real development. It is the view that says, “We’ve always done it this way.” The second mistake we can make about tradition is to flat out reject the voice of history and its traditions simply because its word is old and weary with the dust of the past. This particular mistake prevents accessibility to the benefits of the past. On the contrary, Chesterton says, “tradition is only democracy extended through time.” Every time someone sits down to consider a matter, there is wisdom in many counselors; but it is equally wise to give a vote to those who have gone on before.⁵

These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age. I CORINTHIANS 10:11

7 *That is always the way it is with stay-at-homes. If they like something in their own village they take it for a thing universal and eternal, though perhaps it was never heard of five miles away.*

BOOK EIGHT, SEC. VII, P. 146

How easy it is to think one's current understanding is fully accurate. How easy it is to think that one's social set—church, school, friends, community, political party, associates—have a fairly full grasp of matters and that those who are outsiders are simply ignorant all the way through. How easily we are given to such violent overstatements that quickly categorize others and rapidly dismiss them. One thing is for sure: each of us tends toward our own provincialism; we must break out of it in order to gain a wider view of the world.

Ever wonder what keeps a person so stuck in a rut and so unwilling to listen to other possibilities? No mere mortal gets a last word about anything. This does not mean one cannot have a sure word about some things. The fact that we can have a sure word keeps us from becoming a relativist; the fact that there are no last words preserves us from the pretense of supposing we have a complete and utter grasp of any particular matter. We may believe in the existence of absolutes, but we must never say, "I understand this particular matter absolutely; there is nothing about it I fail to understand. All applications that might ever occur concerning this thing I have fully grasped."

Nobody has achieved an intelligence to rival that of the Divine Omniscience. Human limits should keep all from such arrogance. Every truth known can still be plumbed more deeply and applied to challenges not yet considered. Furthermore, human fallenness should act as a reminder that anyone can twist the truth. Consequently, it is all too easy to imagine that those who fail to see things as we do are necessarily flawed or deficient. But the way of honesty—which can be taken as a synonym for humility—should keep us from such provincialism.

Some people have missed this whole point. They have turned away from these things and spend their time in meaningless discussions. They want to be known as teachers of the law of Moses, but they don't know what they are talking about, even though they speak so confidently. I TIMOTHY 1:6-7

Many, like C. S. Lewis, have suggested that humans are in a sense amphibious beings—both physical and spiritual. We live our lives straddling two worlds. We have something in common with the animals—being creatures of flesh—and with the angels—as spiritual beings. Consequently, the mere life of the flesh cannot fully satisfy. These characteristics of our humanity often lead us to pursue the desires of the spirit against the desires of the flesh. Most often, however, we pursue things of the flesh at the expense of our deepest aspirations, which are spiritual and nonmaterial. Some people seem to live their whole lives in quest of earthly interests. But others, perhaps out of frustration, realize that earthly things cannot fully satisfy the cravings of the heart. Lewis understood this; he experienced it in his own pilgrimage to faith and wrote about it in nearly all his books.

In *The Pilgrim's Regress* the central figure of the narrative is awakened to desire spiritual things. This awakening of desire sends him on a spiritual quest, which he discovers can be satisfied only in Christ. Perhaps all of us long for something or, better, someone apparently beyond our grasp. Perhaps all of life is lived in the presence of one seeking to break through to us; and yet, in the midst of our earthly pursuits, our senses remain dull to experiences alerting us to tether our desire to Christ. Many things in the world God has made call us to attend to him. Nevertheless, the things in our world and in our lives that might awaken desire can also become objects we pursue to fulfill our longing. God gives gifts to woo us to him; he does not give these gifts as replacements for him.

There is wisdom in being sensitive to the wooing of God in our lives. His dawn is always breaking everywhere, all around. Let him illumine the paths that may be followed to him.

Awake, O sleeper, rise up from the dead, and Christ will give you light.

EPHESIANS 5:14

9

[E]vil is fissiparous. . . . The walls of the black hole are the tourniquet. . . . It is the Landlord's last service to those who will let him do nothing better for them. BOOK TEN, SEC. IV, P. 180

Writing about evil in this way, Lewis is drawing on the language of nuclear physics. What he means is that evil's tendency, in the manner of atoms splitting apart into fragments, is toward widespread rippling effects; left unchecked, evil will continue on ad infinitum. How can such a force be stopped if it is fissiparous? Lewis believed that hell is the tourniquet God placed on evil saying, "You can go this far and no further." Thus, he believed that even hell is a testimony to the grace of God.

Divine punishment is seldom something like natural disaster—God could use nature to fulfill his purposes, but he tends to act in a different way. We look at natural calamity and call it tragedy, but the tragedy is not in the act of nature; nature is doing only what nature does. Human ignorance or indifference to nature is what makes natural events appear to be tragic. In fact, the tragedy rests in human folly.

It is a timeworn truth that God's way of punishing is to give people what they want. Augustine, for example, develops this idea in Book I of his *Confessions*. God's laws are fences that define playgrounds where God reveals his intentions for his children as fair and good, because his design is for our ultimate happiness to be found in him. He gives gifts to be used in ways that ensure our fulfillment and prevent our abuse of them. It is only after having stepped outside God's intentions for us that we begin to feel the pain and loss that accompany our foolishness, the realization that we could have avoided that loss by obedience. Yet there is grace to be found even then, for in that moment we can turn to him for forgiveness, grace, comfort, and healing. But what if someone refuses to turn to God, preferring instead to control his or her own destiny? God in his justice does not contradict the gift of free will by removing its consequences. He allows the errant pilgrim to follow his or her own way throughout eternity.

Lewis believed that evil will one day be permanently encapsulated and that hell will be its immovable boundary. Hell is the tourniquet on evil, a prison for the eternally incorrigible. It is an asylum for those who say, "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." God gives them what they want.

Evil people don't understand justice, but those who follow the LORD understand completely. PROVERBS 28:5

10 *[I]t is fools they say who learn by experience. But since they do at least learn, let a fool bring his experience into the common stock that wiser men might profit by it.* AFTERWORD, P. 203

Anyone who has been inclined to pray, “Lord, discipline me,” need pray it only once. Should God answer such a prayer, the consequences would certainly result in some hard lessons. In his *Devotions*, poet John Donne observed, “No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction.”⁶ Much can be learned by suffering the consequences of our own poor choices. But of course there is another, far less painful, way to learn. It may be best to pray that God would keep us from hard hearts and stiff necks so that, wherever possible, we might learn vicariously from the mistakes of others.

Lewis’s Afterword to *The Pilgrim’s Regress* speaks of this vicarious learning. His humility is evident as he offers up his own experience—which may or may not have been born out of foolishness—so his readers might learn and grow from it. Perhaps what he writes here has more application than is noticed at first.

In fact, it may be that all literature provides material fruitful for vicarious learning. It is possible to benefit from the life’s lessons of hundreds of literary characters on display in untold numbers of books. Anyone’s spiritual pilgrimage will be benefited by careful attention to these characters. The same could be said of historical examples and also of the stories set forth in the Scriptures. Those who are most attentive to texts of any kind can hope to avoid the traumas of others by learning from these texts and applying such wisdom to their own lives.

The suffering of some of these characters recorded in literary texts, such as Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, reveals the consequence of long-nurtured bitterness. It may be possible for us, observing this outcome, to turn our own suffering into kindness and empathy. So, too, a Scrooge-like character who has grown miserly and stingy from what a good life has given him may be the occasion for us to learn, by contrast, magnanimity and kindness. Secondhand lessons can protect us from enduring unnecessary emotional heartache, but we must all learn some lessons the hard way. And God’s guidance—and grace—are there so all sorrows may be turned to joy and so hope may be accessible to all.

Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God’s promises to be fulfilled. ROMANS 15:4

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