

JOE RIGNEY



LEWIS

on the Christian Life

BECOMING TRULY HUMAN IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

“Joe Rigney has written an engaging book that artfully pulls together much of what C. S. Lewis had to say about living for the glory of Jesus Christ. Drawing upon Lewis’s books, essays, and letters, Rigney offers an insightful overview of the author’s teaching on Christian discipleship.”

Lyle W. Dorsett, Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

“There may be no more important cultural question today than what it means to be human, and as Joe Rigney says early in this book, C. S. Lewis continues to be refreshing and unique on this question and so many others. Rigney’s ability to re-introduce Lewis to readers is refreshing, unique, and on full display in this book.”

John Stonestreet, President, The Colson Center; coauthor, *A Practical Guide to Culture*

“C. S. Lewis gets to the heart of the human condition, and Joe Rigney gets to the heart of C. S. Lewis. Here is a much-needed book that offers a clear and concise overview of Lewis’s vision for the Christian life. Rigney’s take on Lewis is appreciative where deserved, critical where necessary, and always insightful in its application.”

Trevin Wax, Bible and Reference Publisher, Broadman and Holman; author, *This Is Our Time; Counterfeit Gospels; Gospel-Centered Teaching; and Holy Subversion*

“A thoughtful, lucid, and beautiful exposition of a magnificent writer. Whether you are relatively new to C. S. Lewis or have read all his books, Joe Rigney will show you ideas and connections that are easily missed, and increase your appreciation for Lewis’s insights on the Christian life.”

Andrew Wilson, Pastor, Kings Church London; author, *The Life We Never Expected and Unbreakable*

“C. S. Lewis’s theology is a mix of faithfulness to the creeds, brilliant analogies, rare good sense, and, unfortunately, a few areas of doctrinal weakness. Joe Rigney’s book *Lewis on the Christian Life* accurately reports Lewis’s theology as it relates to practical Christian living. He does an excellent job of bringing out the good sense and carrying on a respectful but critical conversation with Lewis about those shortcomings. The end result is a book that will help you understand Lewis and practice the Christian life. This is a book I’m glad I read and one that you will want to read. I recommend it with enthusiasm.”

Donald T. Williams, R. A. Forrest Scholar, Toccoa Falls College; author, *Deeper Magic: The Theology Behind the Writings of C. S. Lewis*

LEWIS

on the Christian Life

THEOLOGIANS ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

EDITED BY STEPHEN J. NICHOLS AND JUSTIN TAYLOR

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BECOMING TRULY HUMAN IN
THE PRESENCE OF GOD

JOE RIGNEY

 **CROSSWAY®**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Lewis on the Christian Life: Becoming Truly Human in the Presence of God

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Josh Dennis

Cover image: Richard Solomon Artists, Mark Summers

First printing 2018

Printed in the United States of America

Chapter 10, “Christian Hedonics: Beams of Glory and the Quest for Joy,” is based in part on the author’s presentation “Christian Hedonics: C. S. Lewis on the Heavenly Good of Earthly Joys,” delivered at Bethlehem College & Seminary, Minneapolis, October 8, 2016.

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-5055-3

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-5058-4

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-5056-0

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-5057-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rigney, Joe, 1982– author.

Title: Lewis on the Christian life: becoming truly human in the presence of God / Joe Rigney.

Description: Wheaton: Crossway, 2018. | Series: Theologians on the Christian life | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017035074 (print) | LCCN 2018008202 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433550560 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433550577 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433550584 (epub) | ISBN 9781433550553 (tp)

Subjects: LCSH: Lewis, C. S. (Clive Staples), 1898–1963. | Christian life. | Lewis, C. S. (Clive Staples), 1898–1963—Religion. | Christianity in literature.

Classification: LCC BX4827.L44 (ebook) | LCC BX4827.L44 R54 2018 (print) | DDC 230—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017035074>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*The child whose love is here, at least doth reap
One precious gain, that he forgets himself.*

*William Wordsworth,
The Prelude, book 5*

*To my mom,
who helped me to forget myself
so that I could find Joy*

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SERIES PREFACE

Some might call us spoiled. We live in an era of significant and substantial resources for Christians on living the Christian life. We have ready access to books, DVD series, online material, seminars—all in the interest of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ. The laity, the people in the pew, have access to more information than scholars dreamed of having in previous centuries.

Yet, for all our abundance of resources, we also lack something. We tend to lack the perspectives from the past, perspectives from a different time and place than our own. To put the matter differently, we have so many riches in our current horizon that we tend not to look to the horizons of the past.

That is unfortunate, especially when it comes to learning about and practicing discipleship. It's like owning a mansion and choosing to live in only one room. This series invites you to explore the other rooms.

As we go exploring, we will visit places and times different from our own. We will see different models, approaches, and emphases. This series does not intend for these models to be copied uncritically, and it certainly does not intend to put these figures from the past high upon a pedestal like some race of super-Christians. This series intends, however, to help us in the present listen to the past. We believe there is wisdom in the past twenty centuries of the church, wisdom for living the Christian life.

Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The acknowledgments section of a book is where the author attempts to discharge his debts to others. I say “attempts” because no words here can adequately repay the many helps I’ve had in writing this book. Nevertheless, gratitude is good, however inadequate.

Let me begin with the widest possible angle. One significant aid to this project was the wealth of Lewis resources available in a wide variety of formats. In particular, I’ve been greatly helped by listening to Lewis on audiobook. *The Great Divorce*, read by Julian Rhind-Tutt, has in many ways set the standard for me for all audiobooks. (I’ve listened to it half a dozen times in the last year alone.) The same might be said of the Space Trilogy. Of course, I’ve listened to the audio of *The Chronicles of Narnia* at least twenty times with my sons in the car over the last few years. The audio edition of *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces* (forty hours’ worth!) proved to be a wonderful way to explore the breadth of Lewis’s thought. I came away from listening to these essays with a deep awareness of certain themes in Lewis’s thought that recur again and again and again. At the same time, I marvel at the myriad ways Lewis communicated those themes at different times to different audiences. In addition, the C. S. Lewis Collection available through Logos Bible Software proved invaluable for finding particular quotations and linking them with similar thoughts elsewhere in Lewis’s corpus. I shudder to think how long it would have taken me to track down certain quotations if I didn’t have the excellent searchability provided by the software.

Beyond the resources, I’m grateful for the good people at the Chick-fil-A in Bloomington, Minnesota. They kept my cup filled with Dr. Pepper and my belly filled with waffle fries while I wrote large portions of this book at

a table in the back. I'm also grateful to the Lehn family, who allowed me the use of their cabin in Wisconsin for a writing retreat where many threads came together for me.

Narrowing in on specific people, I'm grateful to Justin Taylor and Stephen Nichols for inviting me to contribute to this series. I'm still humbled that they asked me, and deeply thankful for their editorial guidance at various stages of the project. Justin, in particular, was a great help in finding a structure and organization for the tangle of insights I collected during my research.

A number of individuals read various chapters and sections from the book throughout the writing process, improving it every time. I want to acknowledge, in particular, my brother Daniel, who is always a great encouragement and sounding board for me. John Piper, Andy Naselli, Devin Brown, and Rick and Adrien Segal all read through the manuscript with sharp eyes, warm hearts, and a deep love and appreciation for Lewis.

I have the immense privilege of teaching Great Books at Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minneapolis. While writing this book, I was able to teach through the material twice—once to undergraduates and once to seminarians. In both cases, the teaching improved the writing. God has built me to gain clarity through class discussions, and this has proved doubly so when my discussion partners have been students like those at Bethlehem. Special recognition goes to Jesse Albrecht, Zach Howard, Don Straka, and Ross Tenneson, who stayed late after class a few times to help me think through the organization of the book.

Outside my own life and teaching, the primary proving ground for Lewis's insights has been Cities Church, where I am blessed to be a pastor. I'm especially grateful for my fellow pastors—Nick Aufenkamp, David Easterwood, Kevin Kleiman, David Mathis, Jonathan Parnell, and Michael Thiel. It is a true joy to serve with such men. I'm also grateful for my community group, which prayed for me throughout the writing. I have no doubt that some of my key breakthroughs were owing to their intercession.

I don't have words to express my gratitude for my wife, Jenny. This book took a lot out of me, and she picked up the slack. Being the wife of a professor, pastor, and author isn't easy. And Jenny has the amazing ability both to encourage me in my writing and to remind me that real life is more important than books. It's living the Christian life that matters; books exist

to serve life, and the only books worth writing are those that emerge from a life that is awake, alert, and engaged with real people.

My first book on Lewis was dedicated to my sons, who are both lovers of Narnia. I'm eager for the day when I can introduce them to some of Lewis's other books. My excitement for that day is fed by my own memories of encountering Lewis when I was young, and from the great joy I've had in writing this book and seeing the many connections within Lewis's writings.

This book is dedicated to my mom. I have three reasons for this. The first is that though I can't remember distinctly my first journey into Narnia, I know it was she who sent me there (it's likely she took me there with her). She had an old set of *The Chronicles* (the American edition, which orders the books properly, by publication, rather than chronologically). She introduced me to Narnia and, as a result, gave me a tremendous gift.

Second is my mom's encouragement during my first encounter with *Mere Christianity*. I'd somehow acquired a copy when I was about thirteen, and it was like a whole new world had opened before me. What I read thrilled me—the clarity of thought, the vividness of expression, the importance of what Lewis was saying. It churned and churned inside me until I had to get it out. And so I did. I found my mom and dad and tried to reproduce Lewis's moral argument for the existence of God. I remember being frustrated that I couldn't explain it as well as Lewis. But even at that young age, I was discovering that I was a born teacher—I wanted to show people things, just because I liked them and wanted to share them. And my mom was there in the midst of that early stumbling attempt to share what I loved, encouraging me all the way.

Finally, one of the main things I've learned from Lewis is the importance of guileless and self-forgetful enjoyment. In other words, enjoying something simply because you enjoy it—losing yourself in some activity or hobby because it was made for you and you were made for it. In one essay, Lewis describes his delight in seeing a boy on a bus enthralled by a fantasy novel, rapt and oblivious to the whole world. "I should have hopes of that boy," says Lewis.¹ Over the years, I've discovered that some people find this kind of simple and innocent enjoyment difficult. For me, it's always been second nature. And I think I owe that to my mom. She has always joined me in my joy. Whatever excited me excited her. It didn't matter if it

¹ Lewis, *Lilies That Fester*, 38.

was baseball or science fiction novels, toy army men or American history. When I found something that captured my attention, she made sure the fire stayed lit. It never occurred to me that I should enjoy something because the “right” people said I should. The ability to enjoy something spontaneously and wholeheartedly is a gift from God. In my case, that gift was passed to me through my mom. And so it is to her that I dedicate this book.

INTRODUCTION

The best way to learn about Lewis “on the Christian life” would be a book club. If I had my druthers, every person reading this book would join me in a small group (about ten or so individuals) to read and appreciate what Lewis can teach us about the life of faith. We’d read *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity*, the Space Trilogy and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Four Loves* and *Letters to Malcolm*, *The Great Divorce* and *Till We Have Faces*. We might read some of the apologetic works, like *Miracles* or the *Problem of Pain*, and we’d supplement it all with some of Lewis’s essays, sermons, and letters.

The method would be simple. We’d begin reading a book aloud to one another, and I would periodically interrupt to ask a question or make a comment or a connection to something else in Lewis or the Bible. The interruptions would be prime opportunities to press whatever Lewis is saying into our own lives. After the interruption, we’d resume reading. This rhythm of reading and questioning, reading and application, reading and appreciation, would afford a far richer vision of Lewis on the Christian life. For one thing, you’d be getting it straight from the horse’s mouth. More than that, you’d begin to *feel* the organic unity of Lewis’s thought, what his friend Owen Barfield meant when he said, “What he thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything.”¹ Immersing yourself in this sort of Lewis book club would help you to enjoy and not merely contemplate Lewis, and therefore (hopefully) enjoy and contemplate God more deeply.²

But, alas, this book club is not to be. Instead, the best I can offer is this

¹ Owen Barfield, *Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis* (Oxford: Barfield Press UK, 2011), 121–22.

² “Enjoyment” and “contemplation” are technical terms for Lewis. For definitions and descriptions, see chap. 9.

volume on Lewis on the Christian Life. I wish it were a better book. I wish I were able to do the subject matter justice. I owe Lewis so much, and I have only gone deeper in debt through writing this book.

How the Sausage Was Made

A book like this about a thinker like Lewis immediately presents the author with a structural challenge. Some books on Lewis are organized by topic (Will Vaus's *Mere Theology*, and Donald Williams's *Deeper Magic*). Some are organized biographically (Devin Brown's *A Life Observed*). Some seek to provide an overview of Lewis's major works and are thus organized by his writings (Clyde S. Kilby's *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis*, and Wesley Kort's *Reading C. S. Lewis*). I toyed with each of these approaches at one time or another. One of my editors initially suggested structuring the book as a reverse engineering of *The Screwtape Letters*. At one point I considered trying to root everything in *Mere Christianity*, bringing in other works as they unfolded naturally there. I wrote over thirty-five thousand words structured around the theme of dualisms (see below). But in the end, none of these approaches seemed to work.

Now, most authors do not spend so much time telling you about all the books they didn't write. I doubt many readers are all that interested in how the sausage is made; you've come for the eating. I mention these struggles for two reasons. The first is apologetic, and that in both senses. I want to apologize for failing to do my subject justice, and I want to defend myself against certain accusations. Whatever weaknesses remain in this book, they are not because of laziness. But the second reason is the more important, and it will take some explaining. To understand it, I'll need to tell you something about those thirty-five thousand words that I had to abandon (or rework).

After attempting some of the other structures, I settled on the theme of dualisms as the structure to unpack Lewis. The word *dualism* simply means two-ism. A dualism distinguishes between two things that are not identical. Not all dualisms are created equal. There are what we might call "both-and" dualisms and "either-or" dualisms. In either-or dualisms, the two things in question are mutually exclusive. This usually means that one of them is good, and the other is bad. Thus, we must make a choice between them. Both-and dualisms, on the other hand, identify two good

things we may distinguish but must not separate. Instead, we must embrace them both.

These two types of dualism run throughout Lewis's writings; for example, body and soul, enjoyment and contemplation, God and self, pride and humility. Because of our sinfulness, we are constantly mixing up the two varieties. When faced with a both-and dualism, we regularly choose one side over the other; we turn it into an either-or. On the other hand, when faced with a true either-or dualism, we try to keep both things. We refuse to make a choice. Much of Lewis's writings may be seen as an attempt to correct this fundamental confusion. If we are discussing a both-and dualism, Lewis will dissuade us from choosing one and rejecting the other. He will try to keep us from becoming Martin Luther's drunken peasant, who is always falling off one side of his horse or the other. Thus, Lewis will urge the wedding of reason and imagination. If we are discussing an either-or dualism, he will insist that we make a choice. We must not be like the people of Israel, halting between two opinions; or the disciples of Jesus, attempting to serve two masters. Thus, Lewis will write of the great divorce between heaven and hell.

Once you've learned to recognize the two types of dualisms, you will find them everywhere in Lewis's writings. Thus, I initially chose to organize this book around the two types of dualisms. The first part would have been devoted to both-and dualisms. It would have been called "The Givens," since these are the features of reality that are simply there and that we ought to receive as gifts from God. These include reason and imagination, enjoyment and contemplation, nature and arch-nature (or super-nature), Creator and creature, theory and reality, poetry and science, eternity and time, predestination and free will, masculinity and femininity, body and soul, pleasures and Joy (with a capital *J*).

The second part would have covered either-or dualisms, and I would have called it "The Choice." I say "The Choice" and not "The Choices" because Lewis believed that in the end, the Choice is singular, even if it comes to us in a variety of guises. There are many manifestations of the Choice, but at bottom it is the same. This fundamental Choice I call God versus self. Now, in one sense, this is a both-and dualism. Both God and self are good and should be embraced. But the Choice in question is which of these will be at the center? Will it be God, or will it be ourselves? That is the fundamental Choice.

From there, we would have seen how this Choice appears in any number of other dualisms: angels versus demons, pride versus humility, maturity versus autonomy, self-knowledge versus morbid introspection, and beauty versus utility. The Choice appears in our family life, where it becomes affection versus possession. It shows up in our sexual lives, where it is Eros versus lust. And it is in our social lives, where it is friendship versus the “Inner Ring,” and membership versus equality. In our pleasures, it is deciding between self-restraint and repeated indulgence (what Lewis called “encore”). In our view of ourselves, it takes the form of good pretending versus bad pretending. And, of course, in the end, the Choice leads us inexorably toward either heaven or hell.

These chapters would have been punctuated by a number of narrative interludes that would have brought together different elements in the book. Ransom, Jane Studdock, Mark Studdock, Shasta and Digory, and Orual all show in clear ways the nature of the Choice that faces each one of us. But that book was not to be. Instead, I wrote this one. The Choice is still central; it appears in almost every chapter. But instead of accenting Lewis’s dualisms, I emphasize the end and goal of Lewis’s reflections on the Christian life—to help us so encounter the living God that we become our true selves. Becoming fully human in the presence of God—that is what Lewis thought the Christian life is all about.

An Invitation to Explore

As a result of this new focus, I loosened the strictures on organizing the chapters. In some of them, I use *The Screwtape Letters* and *Letters to Malcolm* as the launching point. Given the centrality of the Choice, this is a fitting way to discuss the Devil and prayer and church and so forth. *Screwtape Letters* is the Christian life from the vantage point of the demonic powers that seek to harm us. In it, Lewis shows us the world upside down so that we can better see it right side up. Writing from his basest self, he allowed his imagination to run down the ugly paths and tangled ditches of his heart, giving voice to them through a bureaucratic devil. In the preface, however, he notes that a full treatment of the Christian life would require a similar set of letters from the perspective of a guardian angel. Lewis doesn’t think such a book is possible, because there is no answerable style to the angelic vision. Thus, we’re left with only one side of the coin. However, I’d argue that, while *Letters to Malcolm* doesn’t provide the angelic perspective, it

does give us Lewis's vision of the Christian life in the mode he felt was most appropriate to his station. *Letters to Malcolm* is not didactic or instructional. Lewis was not writing to a student who is seeking his advice or to a congregant seeking pastoral care. Instead, it is, in his words, an exercise in "comparing notes"—two (educated and thoughtful) travelers conversing about the way. Lewis is a fellow pilgrim on the road, not an enlightened guru speaking to us from the destination, still less a Moses coming down from the mountain of God with stone tablets.

The Screwtape Letters and *Letters to Malcolm* thus provide a good entryway into Lewis's vision of the Christian life. But once inside the house of Lewis, there are many doors. Almost every chapter furnishes passages that link book to book, essay to essay, novel to novel. A tangential question in one chapter becomes the launching point for another. Hidden passages emerge all the time, and surprising connections draw together themes from multiple chapters.

Think of the chapters of my book, then, as various doorways—wardrobes if you like—into the world that is Lewis. They are not the only doorways. They may not even be the best. All I can say for them is this—they are some of the ones that have helped me the most. And after reading this book, I hope you find them helpful as well. Or, again, think of the chapters as a set of keys that will enable you to explore a great house, unimpaired by locked doors. But hear me when I say that *exploration* is the point. Keys only get you in the door; the rooms themselves are where the magic happens.

A Great Omission?

In the remainder of this introduction, I want to say a word about why I think Lewis is quite effective in writing about the Christian life. But before I do, I need to say something about what some readers may regard as a significant omission in this book. In the chapters that follow, I do not spend much time drawing from *The Chronicles of Narnia* (though they do show up in a few places). There are two reasons for this omission.

The first is that I've already written a book on Narnia and the Christian life, called *Live Like a Narnian: Christian Discipleship in Lewis's Chronicles*. If I had used all of that material in this book, it would be far too long. Thus, I have been selective in choosing which aspects of Narnia are particularly useful or poignant in this book. To see how Narnia factors into Lewis's vision of the Christian life, you'll have to pick up that book and enter the wardrobe.

The second reason is that the Narnian chronicles are probably the most widely read of all of Lewis's books. Add *Mere Christianity* and perhaps *The Screwtape Letters*, and you have the works of Lewis that most Christians are familiar with. For this book, I want to expand our horizons a bit. I want to expose you to some of Lewis's other writings in hopes that you will get a better sense of the whole of his thought. In particular, I've drawn liberally from the Space Trilogy, *Letters to Malcolm*, *The Great Divorce*, *Till We Have Faces*, *The Four Loves*, and numerous lesser-known essays, as well as some of Lewis's personal letters. My hope is that this book will lead some newcomers to these books and will enrich the rereading of those who are already familiar with them.

Why We Read and Love Lewis

Lewis is a master of the soul. He understands the human heart, in all its deceitfulness and grandeur, both in its good design and in its twisted corruption. He is a master of revealing the secret springs of our actions, of unveiling the true motivations underneath the lies we tell ourselves and others. He knows that our motives are complex; yet he can untangle them and sort through the knottiest bundle with unusual clarity. And because we have the sense that he discovered these secret springs through his own painful introspection (or apocalypses), we are not put out by his candor. Lewis speaks not from abstraction but from experience. He knows that of which he writes. He has had the severe mercy of his insights thrust upon him, so that he knows his matter from the inside and out.

This is what makes Lewis's voice so refreshing and unique. It's why he resonates. His voice is what we would like ours to sound like if we could get outside and speak to our own psyches. He is what one wishes his or her conscience—that great accuser or excuser (for so Lewis is to most of us)—sounded like. He is relentless in his pursuit of the truth. But the relentlessness is coupled with a gentle firmness. It is this combination of contraries that resonates—the willingness to hear our pathetic excuses and dodges and to go on seeing through them, the dogged persistence that won't let us off the hook, the absence of moral hectoring and “putting on airs,” the sense of familiarity and friendship that means he won't abandon us when we finally (and inevitably) relent.

I cannot count the number of times I've been reading Lewis and felt as though someone had given him a map of my heart—a map that included all

the dark places and black caves, the sordid dens of iniquity beyond the reach of the sun. But despite our being exposed, there is no fear of exposure. If Lewis is our accuser, he is a benevolent one. But *accuser* isn't the right word. More like a surgeon, he sees the cancer—he once had it himself (and it never went fully into remission). He sees the toxic bile flowing in our veins. And he won't stop with merely purifying the blood. No half measures here. We will not be healed by a tea strainer. He will find the tumor, that pulsating and throbbing mass in our chests, the remnants of what God intended to be a heart. And when he finds it, he will cut it out. Or, rather, he will pass the scalpel to the Chief Surgeon, who has been standing behind and guiding him all along. And the Surgeon will look at us and ask the same question that the angel asked the lustful man in *The Great Divorce*: "May I kill it?"³

Lewis's ability in this respect is likely unparalleled. Where did he learn to cut through us like that, to tap into our truest desires, our deepest motivations, our ugliest thoughts? He learned it from looking at himself. What he says about how he learned about temptation might equally be said of how he learned of longing:

Some have paid me an undeserved compliment by supposing that my Letters were the ripe fruit of many years' study in moral and ascetic theology. They forgot that there is an equally reliable, though less creditable, way of learning how temptation works. "My heart"—I need no other's—"showeth me the wickedness of the ungodly."⁴

But introspection was not his only school. Lewis lived in books. They were his constant companions, furnishing him with an iconography through which he interpreted his own experience. "In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do."⁵

My Hope for You

That is my hope for this book. I want you to become more yourself by seeing the Christian life through the eyes of C. S. Lewis. I want to help you to enjoy,

³ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 108.

⁴ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, xli–xlii.

⁵ Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 111.

contemplate, and appreciate him as an author and spiritual guide. If after reading this book, you say, “Well then, I understand Lewis better now. No need to read him anymore,” then I will have failed. Success for me will be when, in the midst of reading this book, you throw it down, rush to your shelves, and pull down your copy of *The Great Divorce* or *Perelandra* and, like a good Berean, examine to see whether what I’ve said is so. To treat this book as a replacement for reading Lewis would be a disaster. I honestly believe that I’ve only scratched the surface of Lewis’s profundity and wisdom. But if you treat this book not as a substitute but as an aid, a guide, perhaps even a key to understanding some of the hidden pathways in Lewis’s works, then I think it may be useful. I’ve not seen everything there is to see, but what I have seen has been profoundly fruitful in my own life.

But enjoying, contemplating, and appreciating Lewis is not my only aim. Not even my primary aim. My further hope is the same as Lewis’s own: I want to help you to love God and love your neighbor. I want to help you become truly human—solid, substantive, stable, full of life and joy, and renewed in the image of Christ. Of course, that is not something I can accomplish. It is the gift of God. And so, to begin, I want to invite you into his presence.

CHAPTER I

THE CHOICE

The Unavoidable Either-Or

“Begin where you are.”¹ This little phrase, tucked away in one of the letters to Malcolm, is the right place to begin our exploration of Lewis on the Christian life. Lewis calls this a great principle, and it is implicit in almost everything he writes. Again and again, he wants to bring us back to brass tacks, to awaken us to the present reality, to help us feel the weight of glory that presses on us even now. This is the real labor of life: “to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake.”²

But come awake to what? Ultimately to God. But Lewis knows that we often need a preliminary step. We need to face some sort of “resistant reality.”³ That’s what “begin where you are” is meant to accomplish. The exhortation “Begin where you are” gives us a location, an identity, and a time. Let’s look at each one in turn.

The word “where” denotes location. We are always in a particular place, and Lewis wants us to be attentive to it. Right now, you’re reading this book in a particular place. Take a moment to notice it. The firmness of the chair or the softness of the mattress. The wind in the trees or the smell of the coffee. The noise at the next table or the silence of the living room. There’s a realness to these things, what Lewis calls “quiddity” or “what-ness.” The

¹ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 88.

² *Ibid.*, 75.

³ *Ibid.*, 78.

world around us is real and objective. It is concrete and particular. It has a determinate quality, shape, and texture. And it is full of “impenetrable mysteries.” This world of sights and sounds and smells, “this astonishing cataract of bears, babies, and bananas, this immoderate deluge of atoms, orchids, oranges, cancers, canaries, fleas, gases, tornadoes and toads”⁴—this is what Lewis calls nature. So, to begin where you are means that you begin *here*, in the present location.

Second, the exhortation accents an identity. “Begin where *you* are.” But what are *you*? According to Lewis, you are a thinking thing, a rational animal. Part of you belongs to nature—your body with its senses and motions and stubborn limitations. But there is another part of you, what Lewis calls an intrusion of the supernatural into the world of nature. This is the soul, the part of you that thinks and reasons, that imagines and enjoys, that wills and chooses. According to Lewis, the validity of our reasoning depends upon the transcendence of reason itself. Reason must stand outside of nature in order for it to give us truth about nature. Our thinking, if we are to regard it as true or false, must be a shot from Something beyond nature, a beam from the Light beyond the sun, a participation in the eternal *Logos*. And if this were a book on Lewis’s apologetics, we’d spend some time exploring this argument.⁵ As it is, I’ll simply note that the “you” that is here is also an incomprehensible mystery, half spirit and half animal, straddling the line between nature and super-nature.

Third, Lewis’s great principle accents time. “Begin where you *are*.” Not where you *were*. Not where you *will be*. Where you *are*. Because you are not just here; you’re also *now*. You’re in the present, that astounding place where time touches eternity, the infinitesimal point where the past meets the future. You have a past. You have a future. But all of your living and thinking and enjoying and willing takes place in the present.

So, to begin a book on Lewis, you must begin where you are. And where are you? You, a thinking, imagining, and willing person, are here and now.

God Is Everywhere

But you’re not the only one who is here and now. God also is here and now. God is both omnipresent and in the present. He is present everywhere and everywhen. “We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of

⁴ Lewis, *Miracles*, 105.

⁵ Lewis offers this argument especially in his book *Miracles*.

God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere *incognito*.⁶ But he is not omnipresent in a pantheistic fashion. Pantheism believes everything is God, or at least, a part of God—who is diffused in all things like a universal gas or fluid. But Christianity views God’s omnipresence in a different way. The world is not a part of him, and he is not a gas. Instead, he is *totally* present at every point of space and time, and *locally* present in none.⁷ His omnipresence is that of an author with and in his story; it is only his attention that keeps us going moment by moment. What’s more, space and time do not constrain or confine him. He is transcendent as well as immanent, high and lifted up as well as near and close at hand.⁸

But we can say more. This God who is here and now is “Unimaginably and Insupportably Other.”⁹ He is beyond our capacity to understand. Not only our language but also our thoughts are inadequate to fully grasp or comprehend him. But this is not because he is too abstract for human speech and thought. He is not abstract at all. As the source of this world of concrete and individual things, he himself is concrete and individual in the highest degree. He is not an ultimate principle or ideal or value. He is not “universal being” (as though he were a big vague generality), but “absolute Being” (he alone exists in his own right).¹⁰ He is the ultimate Fact, “the opaque center of all existences, the thing that simply and entirely is, the fountain of facthood.”¹¹ He is incomprehensible and unspeakable not because he is too abstract, but because he is too definite for words.

Not only is God here and now; not only is he the ultimate, concrete Fact; he is also personal. Indeed, he’s more than personal. He is suprapersonal, beyond personality. This too makes him unfathomable to us. He is triune, three-in-one, three persons while remaining one God. We cannot grasp this, any more than two-dimensional beings could grasp what is meant by a cube.¹² But though we may not comprehend him, we can comprehend our incomprehension, and from that beginning, begin to know him.

So, then, to begin to understand Lewis on the Christian life, we must

⁶ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 75.

⁷ Lewis, *Miracles*, 134–35.

⁸ “In Pantheism, God is all. But the whole point of creation surely is that He was not content to be all. He intends to be ‘all in all!’” (Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 70).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13. “All creatures, from the angel to the atom, are other than God; with an otherness to which there is no parallel: incommensurable. The very words ‘to be’ cannot be applied to Him and to them in exactly the same sense” (*ibid.*, 73). In the latter sentence, Lewis is setting for the basic theological principle of analogy: God is both like and unlike his creation.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Miracles*, 139.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹² *Ibid.*, 135–36.

keep ever in our minds these two truths: (1) you are here and now; (2) God—the eternal, omnipresent, suprapersonal Author of all—is also here and now.

God Demands All of Us

But we must go another step. God is not just here and now. He is here and now pursuing us. This ever-present God makes demands of us. And not just any demands. He is not a tax collector, asking for a percentage of your time and resources and leaving the rest to you. As your Creator and Author, he demands all of you. He is the Maker; you are the made. He is the Potter; you are the pot. He is the Author; you are his character. Therefore, he has all rights and claims to you and yours. The almighty Maker of heaven and earth lays claim to your ultimate devotion and affection.

This total claim again sets Christianity off from pantheism. The god of pantheism makes no demands of us. Believing in such a god is attractive precisely for this reason. We get all the emotional comfort of belief in God with none of the unpleasant consequences.

When you are feeling fit and the sun is shining and you do not want to believe that the whole universe is a mere mechanical dance of atoms, it is nice to be able to think of this great mysterious Force rolling on through the centuries and carrying you on its crest. If, on the other hand, you want to do something rather shabby, the Life-Force, being only a blind force, with no morals and no mind, will never interfere with you like that troublesome God we learned about when we were children.¹³

This pantheistic life-force is a tame god, giving us all the thrills of religion with none of the cost. He is there if you wish for him, but he will not pursue you.

But some of us wish to go beyond the life-force. We want a personal god, not a mere impersonal force. But we don't go the whole way with Christianity. We want a personal god, but one who won't interfere. We don't want a Father in heaven so much as a grandfather in heaven—"a senile benevolence who, as they say, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves,' and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all.'"¹⁴

¹³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 26–27.

¹⁴ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 31. The placement and form of quotation marks within Lewis quotations have been Americanized for consistency of appearance.

But the God who is here and now is neither a tame life-force nor a senile grandfather in the sky. He is alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed—the hunter, King, husband.¹⁵ He is not indulgent or soft. He is the Great Interferer, insisting that because he has made us, he knows what is best for us. He pursues and interrupts. He confronts and challenges. He is a lion, and he is not tame. But (and we must never forget) he is also good.

This is why Christianity has an ambivalent relationship with what men commonly call religion. We think of religion as “man’s search for God,” and we place it alongside other departments of human life—the economic, social, intellectual, and recreational. But the living God, the God who is here and now, will not settle for a portion; he demands all. In this sense, if we are to retain the word *religion*, it must encompass and infuse all our activities. There can be no nonreligious acts, only religious or irreligious ones.

Thus, we begin with these three facts: (1) You are here and now; (2) God is here and now; (3) God demands all of you. These three facts yield a fourth: (4) Every moment of every day, you are confronted with a choice—either place God at the center of your life, or place something else there. Either acknowledge the way the world really is, or attempt to live in a fantasy of your own devising. Either surrender to your Creator and Lord, or rise up and assert your own independence. Reality, Lewis says, “presents us with an absolutely unavoidable ‘either-or.’”¹⁶ We live in a world of forked roads, where every path regularly and repeatedly branches in two mutually exclusive directions. Our task is to reject the illusion that, in the end, all paths lead to the same place. We must choose, and our choice will make all the difference.

The Choice in *The Great Divorce*

In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis’s imaginary vision of the afterlife, the narrator journeys from the outskirts of hell (the “Grey Town”) to the outskirts of heaven (the green plains), meeting and conversing with many departed souls. For much of his journey, he is guided by his mentor, George MacDonald (much as Virgil is Dante’s guide in *The Divine Comedy*). Many evangelicals stumble over Lewis’s imaginary tour of the afterlife. His dream suggests that damned souls can take excursions—leave hell and journey

¹⁵ Lewis, *Miracles*, 150.

¹⁶ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, vii.

either to earth or to the doorstep of heaven (what MacDonald calls “the Valley of the Shadow of Life”).¹⁷ More than that, Lewis suggests that these damned souls have another chance to repent after death. They can choose to stay in heaven (though we witness only one soul making such a choice). Finally, Lewis suggests that if a ghost on an excursion chooses to stay in heaven, its time in the Grey Town will have really been purgatory.

Holidays for the damned, second chances after death, and purgatory. What are we to do with these? The first thing is that we must not deny them. They are really in the story and, at least in the case of purgatory, seem to represent Lewis’s actual beliefs. Having said that, we need to see what Lewis is doing in this book, which does *not* include teaching or speculating about the afterlife. In the preface, he is quite clear that he is offering an “imaginative supposal.” The transmortal conditions “are not even a guess or a speculation at what may actually await us.”¹⁸ He reiterates this point at the end of the book in the mouth of George MacDonald. When the narrator discovers that he is dreaming, MacDonald says, “And if ye come to tell of what ye have seen, make it plain that it was but a dream. See ye make it very plain. Give no poor fool the pretext to think ye are claiming knowledge of what no mortal knows.”¹⁹

So if Lewis is not trying to give us detailed knowledge of the afterlife, and if he’s not attempting to give us a treatise on the relationship between eternity and time, what is he doing? MacDonald tells us plainly: “Ye cannot fully understand the relations of choice and Time till you are beyond both. And ye were not brought here to study such curiosities. What concerns you is the nature of the choice itself.”²⁰

That is why Lewis has shared his dream: to clarify the nature of the Choice.²¹ In the dream, we can see the Choice (in all of its various guises) a bit more clearly than we can see it on earth.²² The imaginative supposal gives

¹⁷ MacDonald’s words in the story (Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 68) demonstrate Lewis’s aim. Christianity has traditionally spoken of three realms: heaven, hell, and earth in between. Lewis introduces the Grey Town, which stands between earth and Deep Hell (represented by the fact that it will be dark soon in the Grey Town) and the green plains, which stands between earth and Deep Heaven (represented by the mountains and day breaking). In the supposal, the Grey Town and the green plains are presented as extensions of hell and heaven, but they function as exaggerations of earth in order to clarify the nature of the fundamental choice before us on earth.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

²¹ Here and throughout the book, I will often capitalize the word “Choice” in order to accent its centrality for Lewis. When I do, it’s referring to the fundamental either-or that confronts us. On what the Choice is, see the remainder of this chapter.

²² Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 144.

us a clearer lens. Thus, we need not accept purgatory or second chances or even Lewis's odd views of eternity and time in order to benefit from the story.²³ The main point lies elsewhere, in the choices made by the ghosts. The damned souls who go on holiday are only slight exaggerations of us. They are, in one sense, caricatures. But a caricature is drawn in order to accentuate real features of a person's face. And the ghosts in Lewis's story—with their sins and excuses and grievances and complaints and justifications—are all too real and reminiscent of the person we see in the mirror every day.

The Centrality of the Choice

I highlight Lewis's purpose in *The Great Divorce* because I believe it is his purpose in all his writings on the Christian life.²⁴ In everything he writes, his aim is to remind us that we are here and now, that God is here and now, that this God makes total demands of us, and that therefore we must choose to bow the knee or to bow up, to surrender and join our wills to God's or to resist his will and insist on our own way. In short, Lewis is ever and always attempting to clarify for us the nature of the Choice.

This Choice is inherent in the very idea of creation. In creation, God makes that which is not God. Needing nothing, he “loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that He may love and perfect them.”²⁵ Perfecting us means drawing us into his own life, not in pantheistic fashion, as if we are to be melted down and absorbed into God like drops of water into the ocean. Rather, Christianity shows us how human beings can “be taken into the life of God and yet remain themselves—in fact, be very much more themselves than they were before.”²⁶ Like a boomerang, God flings us into existence with his right hand in order that he might receive us back with his left. But—and this is crucial—we boomerangs can choose whether to return or not.

By creating something other than himself—that is, something not God but possessing a mind and a will—God made the Choice (and therefore sin) possible. “From the moment a creature becomes aware of God as God and

²³ And, for what it's worth, Lewis doesn't truly believe in a second chance after death. As Orual discovers in *Till We Have Faces*, “Die before you die. There is no chance after” (279).

²⁴ Lewis was once asked, “Would you say that the aim of Christian writing, including your own writing, is to bring about an encounter of the reader with Jesus Christ?” Lewis responded, “That is not my language, yet it is the purpose I have in view.” He went on to note that *Letters to Malcolm* is particularly indicative of this approach (Lewis, “Cross-Examination,” in *God in the Dock*, 289–90).

²⁵ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 127.

²⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 161.

of itself as self, the terrible alternative of choosing God or self for the centre is opened to it.”²⁷ The creature that is entirely dependent upon God and can only be happy in God can try to set up on its own, to exist for itself. This is the sin of pride, and it lurks behind all other sins.

[It] is committed daily by young children and ignorant peasants as well as by sophisticated persons, by solitaries no less than by those who live in society: it is the fall in every individual life, and in each day of each individual life, the basic sin behind all particular sins: at this very moment you and I are either committing it, or about to commit it, or repenting it.²⁸

This is what confronts us in the here and now. God says to us, “You must be strong with my strength and blessed with my blessedness, for I have no other to give you.”²⁹ This is the only happiness there is. “To be God—to be like God and to share his goodness in creaturely response—to be miserable—these are the only three alternatives. If we will not learn to eat the only food that the universe grows—the only food that any possible universe ever can grow—then we must starve eternally.”³⁰ This is the Choice: God or self. Happiness or misery. Heaven or hell.

Of course, there are many variations of the Choice. MacDonald expresses it this way in *The Great Divorce*:

“Milton was right,” said my Teacher. “The choice of every lost soul can be expressed in the words ‘Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.’ There is always something they insist on keeping even at the price of misery. There is always something they prefer to joy—that is, to reality. Ye see it easily enough in a spoiled child that would sooner miss its play and its supper than say it was sorry and be friends. Ye call it the Sulks. But in adult life it has a hundred fine names—Achilles’ wrath and Coriolanus’ grandeur, Revenge and Injured Merit and Self-Respect and Tragic Greatness and Proper Pride.”³¹

The Choice always involves clinging to some lesser good instead of clinging to God, putting a second or third thing first, rather than putting God first. We all express this Choice differently. “One will say he has always served

²⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 70.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 47, quoting George MacDonald.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 71–72.

his country right or wrong; and another that he has sacrificed everything to his Art; and some that they've never been taken in, and some that, thank God, they've always looked after Number One, and nearly all, that, at least they've been true to themselves."³²

What's more, this Choice is not a singular event. We don't merely make it one time. Rather, we are always making it. Our little decisions, when gathered together, turn out to be not so little after all. We are always sowing the seeds of our future selves.

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.³³

This is what really matters—these “little marks or twists on the central, inside part of the soul which are going to turn it, in the long run, into a heavenly or hellish creature.”³⁴

We end this chapter where we began. “Begin where you are.” You are still here and now. But now (I hope) you are more aware of the significance of this present moment than you were before. God also is here and now. And he is pursuing you, hunting you, laying total claim to your life. He is offering you life and joy and blessedness. He is offering you himself. And so the Choice confronts you: receive God, or cling to yourself and try to be God. Surrender and become a son of God, or set up on your own and try to replace him. Be happy with his happiness, or turn inward to the broken cisterns in your own soul.

This is the center of Lewis's vision of the Christian life. In the rest of this book, I hope to fill out Lewis's picture. To do so, we must widen the lens a bit. We must get the bigger picture. And so to this bigger picture we now turn.

³²Ibid., 70.

³³Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 92.

³⁴Ibid., 119–20.

C. S. Lewis excelled at plumbing the depths of the human heart, both the good and the bad, the beautiful and the corrupt. From science fiction and fantasy to essays, letters, and works of apologetics, Lewis has offered a wealth of insight into how to live the Christian life.

In this book, Rigney explores the center of Lewis's vision for the Christian life—the personal encounter between the human self and the living God. In prayer, in the church, in the imagination, in our natural loves, in our pleasures and our sorrows, God brings us into his presence so that we can become fully human: alive, free, and whole, transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.

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