

Excerpts of Lewis' writings relevant to temptation

In Session 11, December 10, we focus on C. S. Lewis' writings about temptation. His most well-known work on the topic is *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis says that in this work "My symbol for hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state or a thoroughly nasty business office." I imagine most of you know the book consists of a series of letters written by from a senior devil to an underling about how to tempt a human and keep him away from "the Enemy," i.e., God.

Another relevant work by Lewis is *The Great Divorce*. As he explains in the Preface, there has been a perennial effort by some to achieve a *marriage* of heaven and hell, based on the belief that "reality never presents us with an absolutely unavoidable 'either-or'." But Lewis says "This belief I take to be a disastrous error." He concludes the Preface with the following plea:

"I beg readers to remember that this is a fantasy. It has of course--or I intended it to have--a moral. But the trans-mortal conditions are solely an imaginative supposal: they are not even a guess or a speculation at what may actually await us. The last thing I wish is to arouse factual curiosity about the details of the after-world."

Two readings, each just two pages in length, follow. The first is one of Screwtape's letters. The second is one of the early chapters of *The Great Divorce*.

IX

My dear Wormwood,

I hope my last letter has convinced you that the trough of dullness or “dryness” through which your patient is going at present will not, of itself, give you his soul, but needs to be properly exploited. What forms the exploitation should take I will now consider.

In the first place I have always found that the Trough periods of the human undulation provide excellent opportunity for all sensual temptations, particularly those of sex. This may surprise you, because, of course, there is more physical energy, and therefore more potential appetite, at the Peak periods; but you must remember that the powers of resistance are then also at their highest. The health and spirits which you want to use in producing lust can also, alas, be very easily used for work or play or thought or innocuous merriment. The attack has a much better chance of success when the man’s whole inner world is drab and cold and empty. And it is also to be noted that the Trough sexuality is subtly different in quality from that of the Peak — much less likely to lead to the milk and water phenomenon which the humans call “being in love”, much more easily drawn into perversions, much less contaminated by those generous and imaginative and even spiritual concomitants which often render human sexuality so disappointing. It is the same with other desires of the flesh. You are much more likely to make your man a sound drunkard by pressing drink on him as an anodyne¹ when he is dull and weary than by encouraging him to use it as a means of merriment among his friends when he is happy and expansive. Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy’s ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula. It is more certain; and it’s better style. To get the man’s soul and give him nothing in return — that is what really gladdens our Father’s heart. And the troughs are the time for beginning the process.

But there is an even better way of exploiting the Trough; I mean through the patient’s own thoughts about it. As always, the first step is to keep knowledge out of his mind. Do not let him suspect the law of undulation. Let him assume that the first ardours of his conversion might have been expected to last, and ought to have lasted, forever, and that his present dryness is an equally permanent condition. Having once got this misconception well fixed in his head, you may then proceed in various ways. It all depends on whether your man is of the desponding type who can be tempted to despair, or of the wishful-thinking type who can be assured that all is well. The former type is getting rare among the humans. If your patient should happen to belong to it, everything is easy. You have only got to keep him out of the way of experienced Christians (an

¹ anodyne—something that relieves pain; a source of soothing comfort.

easy task now-a-days), to direct his attention to the appropriate passages in scripture, and then to set him to work on the desperate design of recovering his old feelings by sheer will-power, and the game is ours. If he is of the more hopeful type, your job is to make him acquiesce in the present low temperature of his spirit and gradually become content with it, persuading himself that it is not so low after all. In a week or two you will be making him doubt whether the first days of his Christianity were not, perhaps, a little excessive. Talk to him about “moderation in all things”. If you can once get him to the point of thinking that “religion is all very well up to a point”, you can feel quite happy about his soul. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all — and more amusing.

Another possibility is that of direct attack on his faith. When you have caused him to assume that the trough is permanent, can you not persuade him that “his religious phase” is just going to die away like all his previous phases? Of course there is no conceivable way of getting by reason from the proposition “I am losing interest in this” to the proposition “This is false”. But, as I said before, it is jargon, not reason, you must rely on. The mere word phase will very likely do the trick. I assume that the creature has been through several of them before — they all have — and that he always feels superior and patronising to the ones he has emerged from, not because he has really criticised them but simply because they are in the past. (You keep him well fed on hazy ideas of Progress and Development and the Historical Point of View, I trust, and give him lots of modern Biographies to read? The people in them are always emerging from Phases, aren't they?)

You see the idea? Keep his mind off the plain antithesis between True and False. Nice shadowy expressions — “It was a phase” — “I've been through all that” — and don't forget the blessed word “Adolescent”,

Your affectionate uncle

Screwtape

The publisher's note on the back cover of The Great Divorce may help set the stage for this reading:

"In *The Great Divorce* C. S. Lewis again employs his formidable talent for fable and allegory. The writer, in a dream, boards a bus on a drizzly afternoon and embarks on an incredible voyage through Heaven and Hell. He meets a host of supernatural beings far removed from his expectations and comes to significant realizations about the ultimate consequences of everyday behavior. This is the starting point for a profound meditation upon good and evil."

4.

As the solid people came nearer still I noticed that they were moving with order and determination as though each of them had marked his man in our shadowy company. "There are going to be affecting scenes," I said to myself. "Perhaps it would not be right to look on." With that, I sidled away on some vague pretext of doing a little exploring. A grove of huge cedars to my right seemed attractive and I entered it. Walking proved difficult. The grass, hard as diamonds to my unsubstantial feet, made me feel as if I were walking on wrinkled rock, and I suffered pains like those of the mermaid in Hans Andersen. A bird ran across in front of me and I envied it. It belonged to that country and was as real as the grass. It could bend the stalks and spatter itself with the dew.

Almost at once I was followed by what I have called the Big Man—to speak more accurately, the Big Ghost. He in his turn was followed by one of the bright people. "Don't you know me?" he shouted to the Ghost: and I found it impossible not to turn and attend. The face of the solid spirit—he was one of those that wore a robe—made me want to dance, it was so jocund, so established in its youthfulness.

"Well, I'm damned," said the Ghost. "I wouldn't have believed it. It's a fair knock-out. It isn't right, Len, you know. What about poor Jack, eh? You look pretty pleased with yourself, but what I say is, What about poor Jack?"

"He is here," said the other. "You will meet him soon, if you stay."

"But you murdered him."

"Of course I did. It is all right now."

"All right, is it? All right for you, you mean. But what about the poor chap himself, laying cold and dead?"

"But he isn't. I have told you, you will meet him soon. He sent you his love."

"What I'd like to understand," said the Ghost, "is what you're here for, as pleased as Punch, you, a bloody murderer, while I've been walking the streets down there and living in a place like a pigstye all these years."

"That is a little hard to understand at first. But it is all over now. You will be pleased about it presently. Till then there is no need to bother about it."

"No need to bother about it? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"No. Not as you mean. I do not look at myself. I have given up myself. I had to, you know, after the murder. That was what it did for me. And that was how everything began."

"Personally," said the Big Ghost with an emphasis which contradicted the ordinary meaning of the word, "personally, I'd have thought you and I ought to be the other way round. That's my personal opinion."

"Very likely we soon shall be," said the other. "If you'll stop thinking about it."

"Look at me, now," said the Ghost, slapping its chest (but the slap made no noise). "I gone straight all my life. I don't say I was a religious man and I don't say I had no faults, far from it. But I done my best all my life, see? I done my best by everyone, that's the sort of chap I was. I never asked for anything that wasn't mine by rights. If I wanted a drink I paid for it and if I took my wages I done my job, see? That's the sort I was and I don't care who knows it."

"It would be much better not to go on about that now."

"Who's going on? I'm not arguing. I'm just telling you the sort of chap I was, see? I'm asking for nothing but my rights. You may think you can put me down because you're dressed up like that

(which you weren't when you worked under me) and I'm only a poor man. But I got to have my rights same as you, see?"

"Oh no. It's not so bad as that. I haven't got my rights, or I should not be here. You will not get yours either. You'll get something far better. Never fear."

"That's just what I say. I haven't got my rights. I always done my best and I never done nothing wrong. And what I don't see is why I should be put below a bloody murderer like you."

"Who knows whether you will be? Only be happy and come with me."

"What do you keep on arguing for? I'm only telling you the sort of chap I am. I only want my rights. I'm not asking for anybody's bleeding charity."

"Then do. At once. Ask for the Bleeding Charity. Everything is here for the asking and nothing can be bought."

"That may be very well for you, I daresay. If they choose to let in a bloody murderer all because he makes a poor mouth at the last moment, that's their lookout. But I don't see myself going in the same boat with you, see? Why should I? I don't want charity. I'm a decent man and if I had my rights I'd have been here long ago and you can tell them I said so."

The other shook his head. "You can never do it like that," he said. "Your feet will never grow hard enough to walk on our grass that way. You'd be tired out before we got to the mountains. And it isn't exactly true, you know." Mirth danced in his eyes as he said it.

"What isn't true?" asked the Ghost sulkily.

"You weren't a decent man and you didn't do your best. We none of us were and we none of us did. Lord bless you, it doesn't matter. There is no need to go into it all now."

"You!" gasped the Ghost. "*You* have the face to tell *me* I wasn't a decent chap?"

"Of course. Must I go into all that? I will tell you one thing to begin with. Murdering old Jack wasn't the worst thing I did. That was the work of a moment and I was half mad when I did it. But I murdered you in my heart, deliberately, for years. I used to lie awake at nights thinking what I'd do to you if ever I got the chance. That is why I have been sent to you now: to ask your forgiveness and to be your servant as long as you need one, and longer if it pleases you. I was the worst. But all the men who worked under you felt the same. You made it hard for us, you know. And you made it hard for your wife too and for your children."

"You mind your own business, young man," said the Ghost. "None of your lip, see? Because I'm not taking any impudence from you about my private affairs."

"There are no private affairs," said the other.

"And I'll tell you another thing," said the Ghost. "You can clear off, see? You're not wanted. I may be only a poor man but I'm not making pals with a murderer, let alone taking lessons from him. Made it hard for you and your like, did I? If I had you back there I'd show you what work is."

"Come and show me now," said the other with laughter in his voice. "It will be joy going to the mountains, but there will be plenty of work."

"You don't suppose I'd go with you?" "Don't refuse. You will never get there alone. And I am the one who was sent to you."

"So that's the trick, is it?" shouted the Ghost, outwardly bitter, and yet I thought there was a kind of triumph in its voice. It had been entreated: it could make a refusal: and this seemed to it a kind of advantage. "I thought there'd be some damned nonsense. It's all a clique, all a bloody clique. Tell them I'm not coming, see? I'd rather be damned than go along with you. I came here to get my rights, see? Not to go sniveling along on charity tied onto your apron-strings. If they're too fine to have me without you, I'll go home." It was almost happy now that it could, in a sense, threaten. "That's what I'll do," it repeated, "I'll go home, I didn't come here to be treated like a dog. I'll go home. That's what I'll do. Damn and blast the whole pack of you . . ." In the end, still grumbling, but whimpering also a little as it picked its way over the sharp grasses, it made off.