

Kicking and Struggling: C. S. Lewis, The Dejected, Reluctant Convert
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Abstract: C. S. Lewis is widely recognized as one of the greatest Christian writers ever. Thousands of people have converted to Christianity because of Lewis's writings. But it is easy to forget what a hardened, obnoxious, and proud atheist he was, what a militant opponent of Christianity he was. So the big question is: What made the difference? Why did this cynical, sarcastic atheist become a humble follower of Jesus? This talk presents the story of Lewis's conversion from atheism to theism and eventually to confessing Christ as Lord. Then we look at several principles about conversion we learn from his story. This talk was prepared for a non-Christian audience, but Christians learn much from it as well.

What is one word you could use to describe the change of an obnoxious, egotistical, twisted egghead to a gentle, kind, generous, thoughtful person? If the change involves a transformation from being a militant atheist to a committed follower of Jesus, then the word "conversion" be descriptive and accurate.

The dramatic transformation of C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), one of the most famous and most beloved authors in the world, is what I want to talk about today. Thousands of people love Lewis's writings and he is read by people of all faiths and of no faith the world over. But it is easy to forget what an bad person he was, what a militant opponent of Christianity he was. So the big question is: what changed and why? What happened to so radically change this proud, abusive, obnoxious egghead into a generous, kind, patient, caring person? That's what I'd like to talk to you about today.

I would argue that it is impossible to understand C. S. Lewis or his writings without understanding his conversion to Christ. It would be like trying to understand Romania in 1980's without knowing who Ceausescu was or trying to understand Napoleon without knowing where France was.

We will look at three things: We will begin by taking a brief look at Lewis before his transformation. Then we will look at his conversion. Finally, we will look at principles about conversion we can glean from his experience and his writing.

1. What was Lewis like before his conversion?

So how bad was Clive Staples Lewis before his conversion? The answer is, pretty bad. Lewis was known for being arrogant and self-centered. When he started as a junior member of the faculty at Oxford, he was proud and combative. In 1926 the unconverted Lewis wrote this comment in his diary after he first met the man who would soon be his

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best friend, J. R. R. Tolkien: “He is a smooth, pale, fluent little chap...No harm in him: only needs a smack or two.” This arrogance and dismissive attitude is in spite of the fact that Tolkien had already established himself as a recognized scholar and was six years Lewis’s senior.¹

Alan Jacobs in his excellent biography *The Narnian* points out that “Jack Lewis in his middle teens was a thoroughly obnoxious, arrogant, condescending intellectual prig.”² There is some evidence that pre-conversion he struggled with sadomasochistic tendencies.³ He had a weird or quirky relationship with Mrs. Moore, the mother of his Oxford friend who was killed in the war.

Although he grew up in a Christian home, Lewis became an atheist and bitterly opposed Christianity and the Church and harbored a deep anger at God.

2. How did Lewis convert from being an atheist to a follower of Jesus?

As early as 1920 he had written a friend that he had to admit that the “least objectionable theory” was to “postulate some sort of God.”⁴ I

He started realizing there was a shallowness, a lack of reality in some of the prominent anti-Christian authors such as George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells.⁵ What these men wrote somehow “seemed a little thin,” with “no depth in them.” They were too flat, one-dimensional, “too simple” to capture “the roughness and density of life.”⁶

On the other hand, he was more and more attracted to writers who it turned out were Christians. He was surprised. He also found he was attracted to books which turned out to be written by Christians, like George Herbert, George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton. After reading Chesterton’s *Everlasting Man*, he reluctantly conceded “that Christianity itself was very sensible ‘apart from its Christianity.’”⁷

Yet he was often drawn back by his old antagonism toward Christianity. He admitted later, “I suspect there was some willful blindness...”⁸ While it was increasingly attractive, he really didn’t want Christianity to be true.

Still, he spent much time in introspection. Step by step he became more and more aware of his deep self-centeredness and pride. “For the first time I examined myself with a

¹ Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C.S. Lewis*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 139.

² *Ibid.*, 58.

³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*, Kindle ed. (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 138.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy--the Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 249.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 197-198.

seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was Legion.”⁹

In a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves in 1930, he wrote,

I have found out ludicrous and terrible things about my own character. Sitting by, watching the rising thoughts to break their necks as they pop up, one learns to know the sort of thoughts that do come. And, will you believe it, one out of every three is a thought of self-admiration: when everything fails, having had its neck broken, up comes the thought, ‘What an admirable fellow I am to have broken their necks!’ I catch myself posturing before the mirror, so to speak, all day long. I pretend I am carefully thinking out what to say to the next pupil (for his good, of course) and then suddenly realize I am really thinking how frightfully clever I’m going to be and how he will admire me...And then when you force yourself to stop it, you admire yourself for doing that. It’s like fighting the hydra...There seems to be no end to it. Depth after depth of self-love and self-admiration.¹⁰

Yet, although shaken, Lewis felt confident that Christianity was false and that the historical claims made about Jesus were merely fable. One night he was having an intense discussion with a friend whom he described as “the hardest-boiled of all the atheists I ever knew.” Lewis was shocked when his friend Harry Weldon casually referred to the historicity of the Gospel accounts of Jesus. “Rum thing. It almost looks as it had really happened once.” This admission from an atheist had a “shattering impact” on Lewis. “If he, the cynic of cynics, the toughest of the toughs, were not—as I would still have put it—‘safe,’ where could I turn? Was there no escape?”¹¹

In 1925 he became a tutor at Magdalen College at Oxford. He set about reading and re-reading the Gospel intently. Eventually, as he studied the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels, he realized it was really true!

In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, he describes his conversion from atheism to a belief in God’s existence.

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is

⁹ Ibid., 226.

¹⁰ Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis : A Biography*, Rev. 2002 ed. (London: HarperCollins, 1974), 104-105.

¹¹ Lewis, 223-224.

brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and daring his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?¹²

At the beginning of the next chapter, Lewis quickly explains, “It must be understood that the conversion recorded in the last chapter was only to Theism, pure and simple, not to Christianity. I knew nothing yet about the Incarnation. The God to whom I surrendered was sheerly nonhuman.”¹³

But there were immediate and significant changes for Lewis with his conversion to believing in God. He immediately started going to church. This included church on Sundays at the little church near his home on the outskirts of Oxford and to the chapel service at the college every weekday morning at 8 am. He explains this wasn’t “because I believed in Christianity, nor because I thought the difference between it and simple Theism a small one, but because I thought one ought to ‘fly one’s flag’ by some unmistakable overt sign.” This was in spite of the fact that “the idea of churchmanship was to me wholly unattractive....I was deeply anti-ecclesiastical....I had as little wish to be in the Church as in the zoo.” He admitted that “Hymns were (and are) extremely disagreeable to me.”¹⁴ And he hated organ music.¹⁵

Conversion to Christ

Over the next two years, he read much and had many long conversations with good friends. On September 19, 1931, he asked his close friends J. R. R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, another Oxford lecturer, to eat dinner with him at his college, which they did often. After dinner, they strolled along Addison’s Walk, next to Magdalen College where he lived and taught. They talked until late in the night about myth, paganism and Christianity. One of Lewis’s areas of expertise was mythic literature, especially Nordic. For years Lewis had viewed the story of Jesus giving His life on the cross as merely one more myth among many from the ancient world—endearing, noble, but false.

But on this night, Tolkien and Dyson explained that the Incarnation is a case of a Myth being true, a Myth that really happened. Tolkien went home around 3 am, but Dyson and Lewis talked for another hour or so.

A few days later, on Monday, September 28, 1931 Lewis and his brother Warren took a picnic lunch to Whipsnade Zoo, with Warren driving his motorcycle and Lewis, riding in the side car.

In his own whimsical way, Lewis describes his final step of conversion.

As I drew near the conclusion, I felt a resistance almost as strong as my previous resistance to Theism....To accept the Incarnation was a further step in the same direction. It brings God nearer, or near in a new way. And this, I found, was

¹² Ibid., 228-229.

¹³ Ibid., 230.

¹⁴ Ibid., 233-234.

¹⁵ Ibid., 234.

something I had not wanted. . . . I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. ‘Emotional’ is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.¹⁶

A few days later, on October 1, Lewis closed a lengthy letter to his good friend Greeves with the news: “I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ—in Christianity.”¹⁷

In another letter (October 18, 1931) to Greeves, Lewis summarized the insight they gave him in this long conversation. “Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*....” He explains that this is based on “the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection” of Jesus.¹⁸

Lewis was changed, radically changed. Walter Hooper, who served Lewis as his assistant in the months before he died, said, “Lewis struck me as the most thoroughly *converted* man I had ever met.”¹⁹ Erik Routley, an undergraduate at Magdalen, the Oxford college where Lewis taught for years, heard him preach his now-famous sermon, “The Weight of Glory.” Although he only met Lewis two or three times, Routley recalled years later that, when listening to him, one felt that “here was a man who had been laid hold of by Christ and who enjoyed it.”²⁰

3. What can we learn from Lewis about conversion?

One of the great classics on conversion and the Christian life is Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*. This book contains a series of talks he gave on BBC during the war from 1941 through 1944. His broadcasts became so popular that his voice was one of most familiar in all of Great Britain.

Since he gave this as a series of talks, they are conversational and easy to follow. He explains the core teachings of the Bible in simple, direct, plain language. It is definitely not your typical theology book. Lewis argued that it wasn’t a theology book at all. His arguments are easy to follow such as his famous Trilemma argument, viz., that we only have three choices about Jesus: He was either Lord, liar, or a lunatic.

¹⁶ Ibid., 237.

¹⁷ Green and Hooper, 115.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 1st ed., 3 vols. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), I:977.

¹⁹ In the Preface to C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), 12.

²⁰ *Remembering C. S. Lewis--Recollections of Those Who Knew Him*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 106.

Mere Christianity and Lewis's other writings teach us much about conversion, not only his, but conversion and the life that follows in general. Michael Ward points out that Lewis's nonfiction "abounds with similes, metaphors, and analogies" attempting to depict the amazing work of God in an individual as they are converted from death to life. He unpacks this with a number of examples.

A brief survey of *Mere Christianity* supplies the following list: becoming a Christian (passing over from death to life) is like joining a campaign of sabotage, like falling at someone's feet or putting yourself in someone's hands, like taking on board fuel or food, like laying down your rebel arms and surrendering saying sorry, laying yourself open turning full speed astern; it is like killing part of yourself, like learning to walk or to write, like buying God a present with his own money; it is like a drowning man clutching at a rescuer's hand, like a tin soldier or statue becoming alive, like waking after a long sleep, like getting close to someone or becoming infected, like dressing up or pretending or playing; it is like emerging from the womb or hatching from an egg; it is like a compass needle swinging to north, or a cottage being made into a palace, or a field being plowed and resown, or a horse turning into a Pegasus, or a greenhouse roof becoming bright in the sunlight; it is like coming around from anesthetic, like coming in out of the wind, like going home.

Rather than saying, "Come to Jesus," Lewis is saying, "This is what it is like to come to Jesus. If you're not attracted or interested or assisted by this way of putting it, here are a dozen other ways of considering the same thing."²¹

Here are some principles about conversion we learn from this "thoroughly converted" man, Lewis.

Conversion to Jesus can be painful.

From Lewis's perspective the experience of conversion to Christ was unpleasant, even though the after effect was wonderful.

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis explains,

I quite agree that the Christian religion is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in the dismay I have been describing, and it is no use at all trying to go on to that comfort without first going through that dismay.... If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end: if you look for comfort, you will not get either comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.²²

²¹ Michael Ward, "Escape to Wallaby Wood: Lewis's Depictions of Conversion" in Angus J. L. Menuge, *C.S. Lewis, Light-Bearer in the Shadowlands: The Evangelistic Vision of C.S. Lewis* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1997), 151.

²² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Touchstone ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952), Bk I, ch. 5, 38-39.

In his writings Lewis frequently pointed to the unpleasant side of conversion, often describing it in metaphorical terms. For instance, in *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis describes a graphic scene in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (chapter 7) of how obnoxious, self-centered Eustace became a dragon. Eventually, he tires of being a dragon which destroys things. Aslan approaches him. Eustace describes what happened.

“Then the lion said, You will have to let me undress you. I was afraid of his claws, but I was pretty nearly desperate now....

“The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off....

“Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off....Then he caught hold of me—I didn’t like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I’d no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious...”²³

Everyone who has dreaded confessing how bad and how wrong and how dirty they have been, have experienced that deep pleasure of feeling clean and new and fresh, after enduring the pain of getting rid of the scales of sin.

Another graphic description of the pain of conversion comes in *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. Just before the pilgrim plunges into the water, the narrator describes this scene. “And how John managed it or what he felt I did not know, but he also rubbed his hand, shut his eyes, despaired, and let himself go. It was not a good dive, but, at least, he reached the water head first.”²⁴

Notice the “despair.” Very typical of what happens in the process of conversion. No wonder, they used to call the altar where sinners knelt to pray, the “mourner’s bench.” Most all of us have had lots to mourn over—with much pain and remorse.

Lewis was always clear that while conversion might be unpleasant for us, the price paid by Jesus for our redemption was far more painful than any discomfort we will ever experience and it was exactly our sins that caused His pain. In *Mere Christianity* Lewis succinctly states, “It costs God nothing, so far as we know, to create nice things: but to convert rebellious wills cost Him crucifixion.”²⁵

Conversion to Jesus requires a choice

²³ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of Dawn Treader*, *Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: Collier, 1952), Ch 7, 90-91.

²⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress; an Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism* (Grand Rapids,: Eerdmans, 1943; repr., 1974), 170.

²⁵ *Mere Christianity*, Bk IV, Ch 10, 181.

One of the recurrent themes in *Mere Christianity* is that, in contrast to all the other Laws of Nature, such as gravity, we have a choice as to whether we obey the Moral Law or not.²⁶ After his observation about converting rebellious wills cost Jesus crucifixion, he went on to say, “And because they are wills they can—in nice people just as much as in nasty ones—refuse His request.”²⁷

Lewis wrote, “The odd thing was that before God closed in on me, I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice.” He describes how he was riding on the top level of one of those famous English two-story buses, “going up Headington Hill” outside Oxford. “I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets....I felt myself being, there and then, give a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut;...” “I chose to open....I say ‘I chose,’ yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite.”²⁸

Conversion to Jesus requires admission that we have done wrong.

Before you are open to being converted, you must face the truth that you need help—indeed that you desperately need help. This is the truth that will set you free. And you need to face the truth about Jesus—that He is the only one who can make you what you should be.

There are two foundational principles in *Mere Christianity*. First, there is a natural moral law which operates in the universe, the Law of Right and Wrong which everyone recognizes, especially when wrong is done to them. The second principle is that we have all done wrong—things we know are wrong.²⁹

In *Mere Christianity* he wrote that Christianity,

will teach you that in fact you can’t be ‘good’ (not for twenty-four hours) on your own moral efforts. And then it will teach you that even if you were, you still wouldn’t have achieved the purpose for which you were created. Mere *morality* is not the end of life....The people who keep on asking if they can’t lead a decent life without Christ, don’t know what life is about....We are to be re-made.”³⁰

Lewis insisted that we must admit—confess—that we are wrong and we have done wrong. We have sinned.

Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people who do not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel that they need any forgiveness. It’s after you have realized that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind the law,

²⁶ Ibid., Bk. I, ch 3, pg. 28.

²⁷ Ibid., Bk IV, Ch 10, 181.

²⁸ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy--the Shape of My Early Life*, 224.

²⁹ *Mere Christianity*, Bk I, Ch. 1, pg 20-21.

³⁰ *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, (“Man or Rabbit?”), 112.

and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power—it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk. When you know you are sick, you will listen to the doctor....³¹

Conversion to Jesus requires surrender to Him.

Lewis realized that a central motivation for his atheism was his desire to be left to himself. “I had always wanted, above all things, not to be ‘interfered with.’ I had wanted (mad wish) ‘to call my soul my own.’”³²

In *The Great Divorce*, a murderer explains, “I only want my rights. I’m not asking for anybody’s bleeding charity.” But he is urged, “Then do. At once. Ask for the Bleeding Charity. Everything is here for the asking and nothing can be bought.”³³ By capitalizing “Blood,” Lewis made it clear he was talking about Jesus’ death on the cross.

He has stark words to say about surrender in *Mere Christianity*.

In other words, fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realizing that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor—that is the only way out of a ‘hole.’ This process of surrender—this movement full speed astern—is what Christians call repentance. Now repentance is no fun at all....It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death. In fact, it needs a good man to repent.³⁴

Lewis gives a graphic description of surrender of one’s rights and even one’s determining how to come to salvation in *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. The pilgrim struggles with surrender. When Mother Kirk tells him to take off his rages and dive into the water, he protests,

“‘Alas,’ said he, ‘I have never learned to dive.’

‘There is nothing to learn,’ said she. ‘The art of diving is not to do anything new but simply to cease doing something. You have only to let yourself go.’

‘It is only necessary,’ said Vertue, with a smile, ‘to abandon all efforts at self-preservation.’”³⁵

Surrender is wholly unnatural to the natural man. In our fallen unredeemed state, we naturally want our own way. We insist on it, even to the point of asking God to save us in the way we prefer and not the way He demands. We must surrender.

³¹ *Mere Christianity*, Bk I, ch. 5, 38-39.

³² *Surprised by Joy--the Shape of My Early Life*, 228.

³³ *The Great Divorce, the Best of C. S. Lewis* (Washington, D.C.: Canon Press, 1969), ch. 4, 131.

³⁴ *Mere Christianity*, Bk II, ch. 4, 59-60.

³⁵ *The Pilgrim's Regress; an Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*, 168-169.

Conversion to Jesus brings new ownership.

God's reconstruction of our lives after conversion can be unsettling; it can be painful as we have already seen. We are no longer in control. In *Mere Christianity* Lewis compares it to remodeling a house.

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.³⁶

The object of all this reconstruction is to make us more like Christ. He explains, “Putting on Christ’...is not one among many jobs a Christian has to do; and it is not a sort of special exercise for the top class. It is the whole of Christianity. Christianity offers nothing else at all.”³⁷

“Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”³⁸

Conversion to Jesus brings transformation.

Not only does conversion to Jesus bring new ownership, it brings renovation, transformation. Immediately after Lewis “chose” to open the door to God, he realized he was changing. “I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt. The melting was starting in my back—drip-drip and presently trickle-trickle. I rather disliked the feeling.”³⁹

Lewis believed, both because of his own experience as well as observing others, that conversion to Jesus is radical—He brings real change to a person's life, transformation. “The regenerate man is *totally* different from the unregenerate, for the regenerate life, the Christ that is formed in him, transforms every part of him: in it his spirit, soul and body will all be reborn.”⁴⁰

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis declares,

If conversion to Christianity makes no improvement in a man's outward actions—if he continues to be just as snobbish or spiteful or envious or ambitious as he was

³⁶ *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2009). Book IV, ch 9, page 205.

³⁷ *Mere Christianity*, Bk IV, Ch. 8, pg 168.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Bk. IV, Ch. 8, pg. 168.

³⁹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy--the Shape of My Early Life*, 225.

⁴⁰ *Miracles, the Best of C. S. Lewis* (Washington, D.C.: Canon Press, 1969), Appendix A, 370.

before—then I think we must suspect that his ‘conversion’ was largely imaginary;...When we Christians behave badly, or fail to behave well, we are making Christianity unbelievable to the outside world.⁴¹

Conversion requires intervention by Jesus Himself.

The religious world, including many Christian churches, often promote detours—routes to the Christian life without repentance, without conversion. The shortcut may consist of a liturgy or ecstatic experience or mere intellectual assent. But Jesus doesn’t offer any shortcuts or detours. Jesus Himself often spoke of the heavy cost of taking up our cross and following Him.

Lewis insisted, “Conversion requires an alteration of the will, and an alteration which, in the last resort, does not occur without the intervention of the supernatural.”⁴²

One of the big reasons supernatural intervention from God is required is because Satan so staunchly opposes conversion. In a letter Lewis observed that Satan tries to interfere. “I think that all Christians have found that he is v. active near the altar or on the eve of conversion; worldly anxieties, physical discomforts, lascivious fancies, doubt, are often poured in at such junctures...But the Grace is not frustrated. One gets *more* by pressing steadily on through these interruptions than on occasions when all goes smoothly.”⁴³

We need Jesus and His work in our lives in order to be truly converted. There are no detours.

Conversion almost always involves other people.

Lewis was clear that it was his late-night conversation with J. R. R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson that helped him cross the line to Jesus. Lewis first met Tolkien in May 1926.⁴⁴ It took a while, but by 1929 they were having long talks. So they had known each for five years, and closely for two years, when Tolkien was finally able to convince Lewis of the viability of the message about Jesus. God often uses friendships to bring people to the knowledge of the truth. He may even use people who are not friends. For instance, Stephen probably played a key role in the eventual conversion of Saul, who was an accomplice to his murder.

Conversion is designed to make us clean and holy.

Lewis would not be impressed with seeker-sensitive churches who try to make the Gospel palatable. He used direct, hard language to explain the demands of the Gospel. “When he said, ‘Be perfect,’ He meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment.”⁴⁵

In this same chapter, he goes on to declare,

⁴¹ *Mere Christianity*, Bk. IV, Ch. 10, 177-178.

⁴² *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Ch. "The Decline of Religion," 221.

⁴³ Lewis and Hooper, (Letter written on March 5, 1951), III:1993.

⁴⁴ McGrath, 128-129.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Bk. IV, ch. 8, 170-171.

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

Both harder and easier than what we are all trying to do. You have noticed, I expect, that Christ Himself sometimes describes the Christian way as very hard, sometimes as very easy. He says, “Take up your Cross”—in other words, it is like going to be beaten to death in a concentration camp. Next minute he says, “My yoke is easy and my burden light.” He means both.⁴⁶

As Bonhoeffer famously said, “When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die.” The demand of Jesus for our total allegiance and obedience is uncompromising. Without transformation, there has been no conversion.

Conversion makes us more truly ourselves.

Ironically, even though we shy away from repentance and conversion in our sinful state, that is actually the only way we will ever be able to become what we were created to be. Lewis explains, “The more we get what we now call ‘ourselves’ out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. There is so much of Him that millions and millions of ‘little Christs’, all different, will still be too few to express Him fully.”⁴⁷

Conversion requires effort and perseverance.

Of course, conversion is by faith but that does not mean it does not involve any effort on our part to surrender to Christ or to remain in Christ. Even though we are totally depraved, God’s prevenient grace makes it possible to choose to submit to Him. Even after surrendering to Him, we must earnestly strive to grow in Him, as we are taught in 2 Peter 1:10; 3:14, 18; James 1:4; Hebrews 5:14; 1 Timothy 4:15; 6:11; Philippians 3:12-14)

As Dallas Willard pointed out, the fact that salvation is free through God’s grace does not mean effort is not required on our part.⁴⁸ Lewis warned, “...a Christian can lose the Christ-life which has been put into him, and he has to make efforts to keep it. But even the best Christian that ever lived is not acting on his own steam—he is only nourishing or protecting a life he could never had acquired by his own efforts.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., Bk IV, Ch. 8, 169.

⁴⁷ Ibid., Bk. IV, Ch. 11, 190.

⁴⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 166.

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Bk II, Ch. 5, 64.

After conversion, every Christian encounters tests and even attacks on their faith. Lewis counseled, "...we must pray for the gift of Faith, for the power to go on believing not in the teeth of reason but in the teeth of lust and terror and jealousy and boredom and indifference that which reason, authority, or experience, or all three, have once delivered to us for truth."⁵⁰

God usually works in what we might call a divine/human synergy in which God acts, but He requires us to act. This does not mean that salvation is not by faith or that it is by our own effort. But God calls us and we choose to either respond or to turn Him away. When we do respond and turn to Him, even that action is made possible because of His help.

Regarding his own conversion, Lewis remembers, "But it is significant that this long-evaded encounter happened at a time when I was making a serious effort to obey my conscience. No doubt it was far less serious than I supposed, but it was the most serious I had made for a long time."⁵¹

How Do We Respond?

Today we have looked at the life of an amazing man. He was transformed from being a truly awful person to becoming a truly gracious, kind, generous man. But it all happened because he was willing to take a long, hard look at his own life and a long, hard look at the evidence that Jesus was who He claimed to be—God-in-the-flesh, and a long, hard look at the teachings of Jesus and eventually he surrendered to the One he had hated for so long. And that step, that surrender, changed everything.

Wherever you are in your pilgrimage, I hope you will learn from Lewis and his example. You will never regret surrendering to the One who created you.

Some of my Favorite C. S. Lewis Books

Mere Christianity
The Weight of Glory
Chronicles of Narnia
God in the Dock
The Great Divorce
The Screwtape Letters
Till We Have Faces

Other Articles about C. S. Lewis

McCarthy, Daryl. "Mere Christianity is Not Casual Christianity: How C. S. Lewis Walked With God." 2016. Available at <https://www.leadershipanvil.org/resources>.
 McCarthy, Daryl. "Living With Hope in a Hopeless World: Learning from C. S. Lewis." 2022. Available at <https://www.leadershipanvil.org/resources>.

⁵⁰ *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids,: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1967), 43.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

Recommended Books on Lewis's Life

- Dorsett, Lyle W. *Seeking the Secret Place: The Spiritual Formation of C. S. Lewis*
 Green, Roger Lancelyn, and Walter Hooper. *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*
 Jacobs, Alan. *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis*
 Sayer, George, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*

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- Menuge, Angus J. L. *C.S. Lewis, Light-Bearer in the Shadowlands : The Evangelistic Vision of C.S. Lewis*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1997.
- Remembering C. S. Lewis--Recollections of Those Who Knew Him*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005.
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