



## C. S. Lewis

1893 – 1963

*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 see then what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms.*

So wrote Clive Staples Lewis of his conversion in his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*. “Dejected” and “reluctant” were true only in the sense that “Jack” (as all his friends called him) was now “defeated,” having held out against God for years. As persistently as Lewis had marshalled arguments of every kind to confirm him in his agnosticism, the Hound of Heaven had crept ever closer. Possessed of an unusual ability in philosophy, Lewis finally admitted reluctantly that the *rational* case for God had better philosophical support than the case against God. His intellect took him to the very doorway of faith. Then he stepped ahead in the simple surrender and trust which also characterize the least sophisticated of God’s children. Lewis was “surprised” by joy. The nagging, nameless longing that had haunted him for years and that he had tried alternately to satisfy and to deny now gave way to contentment. He had been looking for his answer in the wrong place.

Ten million copies of Lewis’s books have now been sold. Universities offer courses in his vision. Reading societies devoted to

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his works flourish. He is esteemed as an author of children's stories as well as adult fiction; a poet; an essayist whose mind probed the entire range of human experience; a critic of English literature; a radio broadcaster. Yet he is best known to Christians as a thinker who argued compellingly for the reality of God and the truth of the gospel. His all-time bestseller, *Mere Christianity*, now fifty years old, continues to excite readers with the sheer grandeur, truth, and practicality of the Good News.

Not surprisingly, his childhood was unusual. Books overflowed everywhere in his Belfast home. When little more than an infant he read constantly in history, philosophy, and literature. His mother schooled him in French and Latin. A teacher soon added Greek. At age sixteen he was sent to a school that prepared youths for university scholarships. Here he was tutored six hours every day by an agnostic who insisted that the young student *think*. In the providence of God, it was this agnostic's integrity that bore fruit for the Kingdom, for it was this training in reasoning that subsequently helped untold Christians obey the command to love God with their mind.

Lewis interrupted his studies at Oxford to serve in World War I in France. There he began reading Christian thinkers whose influence never left him, men such as George Macdonald, a Scottish poet and essayist, and G.K. Chesterton, a Roman Catholic. Concerning his reading of such men Lewis later wrote, tongue-in-cheek, "A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere . . . God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous."

While probing the world of literature he saw that the literary figures whose intellectual rigour he most esteemed—the great English poets Milton and Spenser, for instance—were believers. On the other hand, well-known literary figures whose work struck him as less substantial (Voltaire, H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw) were unbelievers. These latter "seemed a little thin; what we boys called 'tinny' . . . they were too simple."

Zealous articulation of Christian truth was a rarity at Oxford, and an oddity as well. Lewis quickly became the butt of taunts and jibes. Yet no fair-minded academic could deny his intellectual power. The result was that Lewis's reputation as a scholar and teacher inside university circles and his readership outside swelled alike.

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A layman himself, Lewis was always concerned chiefly with expounding the historic Christian faith, that “deposit” (I Tim. 6:20) of the gospel that had endured the acids of contempt, the dilution of shallow clergy and the distortion of heresy. Only the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) would ever save.

A bachelor for most of his life, the fifty-eight year old Lewis surprised many when he married Joy Davidman. She had been raised by secularized Jewish parents, had entered university when only fourteen, and then had found her hard-bitten Marxist atheism yielding to the gospel. When a newspaper reporter asked her to describe her coming-to-faith she replied simply, “How does one gather the ocean into a teacup?” Her quick mind rendered her and Lewis soul-mates. “No corner of her mind or body remained unexplored,” he wrote in his anguish following her death. The death came as no surprise—he had known she was terminally ill when he married her. Nonetheless, he believed that God had given them to each other. His mourning found expression in *A Grief Observed*, a book that continues to bind up the brokenhearted.

A man whose humility was as genuine as his intellect was vast, Lewis knew that discipleship is a matter of faithfulness in the undramatic episodes of life: support for an alcoholic brother, patience with a querulous housekeeper, diligence in answering even silly-sounding correspondence—not to mention living off as little of his income as possible in order to give the remainder away.

C.S. Lewis died on the same day as did President John F. Kennedy and author Aldous Huxley. News of their deaths displaced his. Yet in the upside-down Kingdom of God, his significance remains inestimable.

