

*Affectionately Yours, Screwtape:*

*The Devil and C.S. Lewis*

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[Part I]

Years before the battle between Aslan and the White Witch in the fictional kingdom of Narnia was penned, C.S. Lewis had explored the theme of good and evil in a thin volume of imaginative letters between two devils. Philosophical and diabolical, yet entertaining and easily readable by the masses, *The Screwtape Letters* challenge our preconceived notions of heaven and hell, good and evil, God and Satan. This timeless work remains one of the definitive literary classics of the twentieth century.

C. S. Lewis was not the first writer to explore the mysteries of the underworld. In the early 1300's, the Italian poet Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy*, which took its readers on a journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise and left us with the memorable line inscribed on the Gate of Hell, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." In 1667, epic English poet John Milton tackled the subject of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. His Satan uttered the noteworthy phrase that it is "better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." These were certainly great literary works, but their length and numerous mythological references made them inaccessible to many modern readers.

It would take a man who was at one time a self-proclaimed atheist to produce a work that would personify Satan to a new era of readers. Clives Staples Lewis may have seemed like a strange choice to become the torchbearer for Christian apologetic writings in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, from a young age, it was certain that Lewis would develop as a brilliant, analytical thinker, a modern renaissance man. He was born in 1898, the

younger of two boys. His mother died when he was a young boy and so he was raised by his father and sent away to boarding school. His childhood was filled with books and he grew up with a love for literature, poetry, music and languages. Both parents were descended from clergymen and he was raised as a small child in the Church of Ireland before drifting away from his faith after his mother's death.

Upon reaching adulthood, Lewis enrolled at Oxford University, but his time there was cut short by the call to duty in World War I. He volunteered for military service and by his nineteenth birthday, was en route to battle in the trenches of Northern France. His experiences there made a lasting impression and one of the central themes of *The Screwtape Letters* is the effect of war on the human soul. Lewis was wounded in battle by an exploding shell the following year, and after receiving a medical discharge, he returned as a student to Oxford University. He graduated with honors and was elected to teach English at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he immersed himself in debates and conversations with his Christian friends, notably *Lord of the Rings* author J.R.R. Tolkien.

Over a period of several years, Lewis began to wrestle with the idea of Christianity. He was influenced by Tolkien and by the writings of G.K. Chesterton and wrote in 1929 that he was ‘the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.’”

Lewis wrote his first book, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, in 1933. More than 40 works followed, including *The Screwtape Letters*, which first appeared in the London newspaper *The Guardian* in 1942. The Letters were collected and printed in book format

and have enjoyed an immense popularity ever since. Perhaps Lewis himself was surprised by the success of the work; he admitted that while the writing process was easy, he did not enjoy producing the work and that it even “almost smothered” him before he was done.

*The Screwtape Letters* are a series of thirty-one epistles written by Screwtape, a senior devil, to his nephew, a junior tempter named Wormwood. The correspondence describes the efforts of Wormwood to seduce an ordinary young man in England to eternal damnation. Screwtape encourages the apprentice tempter to encourage corruption of every facet of the man’s life, from his faith and love relationships, to his hobbies and pastimes, to even his patriotism in a time of war.

In their quest to derail the young man from a holy life, the two devils are rather cunning, for they are not interested in finding the one perfect moment by which the young man will turn his back on his faith and his God. Rather, Screwtape and Wormwood seek to win over the man gradually through the persistent and systematic corruption of all that he enjoys and believes.

“The safest road to Hell,” Lewis writes, “is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

And how did Lewis view hell and devils? As he explained in his 1961 preface to the expanded edition of *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis compared hell to a bureaucracy, a

“Lowerarchy” as he calls it, where the greatest evil is “conceived and ordered in clean, carpeted, warmed and well-lighted offices by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice.”

Throughout the centuries, artists and writers have portrayed Satan as a horned creature with goat-like hooves and beard holding a trident. It is believed that this depiction of Satan was based on Greek mythology and modeled after gods such as Pan and Dionysus. There is also a connection to the idea of a Horned God personified in characters such as the British Herne the Hunter and the Hindu Pahupati.

In recent times, this mythic image has morphed to a handsome man with a goatee, suggesting Satan’s charm and allure. Lewis, however, broke away from the traditional representations of Satan, envisioning him not as an impish figure with a red cape and pitchfork, but as a CEO running a vast multi-layered organization of chaos and evil.

[Part II]

The image of the devil in literature and art has derived from legend and mythology. But what about the names of the evil one Lewis refers to as Our Father Below in *The Screwtape Letters*? The word Satan comes from the Hebrew and means “accuser” or “adversary.” Many other names have developed throughout the centuries. The name Lucifer comes from a combination of two Latin words, *lux* (meaning light) and *fero* (to bring), thus the denotation of Lucifer as a light-bearer. The Bible refers to Lucifer in the Old Testament book of Isaiah:

Scripture: How are you fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How are you cut down to the ground, which did weaken the nations! (Isaiah 14:12)

Originally, it was assumed that this verse referred to a king of Babylon, most likely Nebuchadnezzar. However, some of the early Church fathers such as Tertullian linked this text directly to Satan. As proof, he referenced quotations from the Gospel of Luke in which Satan falls as lightning from heaven, and from the book of Revelation, where Satan was similarly cast down after warring with a heavenly host of angels led by Michael the Archangel:

Scripture: The great dragon was cast out, that old Serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceives the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels

were cast out with him...the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. (Revelation 12:9, 10b)

St. Jerome shared this view and incorporated the interpretation of Lucifer as Satan into his fourth century Latin Vulgate.

In the late 1500's, playwright Christopher Marlowe dramatized the idea of Lucifer as Satan in his great work *Dr. Faustus*, a play that would have been intimately known to C.S. Lewis as a scholar and teacher of Renaissance and Elizabethan literature. The story retells the German myth of Faust, who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for power and knowledge.

Another name for Satan is Beelzebub, inspired by the Canaanite god Baal. The Gospel writers refer to him as they describe an instance when the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the name and power of the devil:

Scripture: This fellow does not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub, the prince of the devils...(Matthew 12:24)

Satan has many names, and in the Bible, we find he also has several clandestine purposes. As his Hebrew name suggests, he is an accuser, a role clearly defined in the Old Testament book of Job, where Satan appears as a prosecutor-type figure ready to indict a man the Scriptures declare as righteous, and in the book of Zechariah, where Satan

accuses the high priest Joshua of being clothed in filthy garments, implying that he was stained with sin. We also find Satan as an adversary, such as when he takes the form of a serpent in the Garden of Eden, and as we find in the book of 1 Chronicles, when Satan leads David to sin by taking a census of the nation of Israel.

Both *The Screwtape Letters* and the Bible portray Satan as an evil adversary, but is he the antithesis of God the Father, the Enemy as Screwtape calls him? Not according to Lewis, who believed that God had no opposite. He believed that if you took away every good attribute of God, there would be nothing left to comprise a counterpart.

Instead, Satan began as an angel who rebelled against God by his own choice and led a throng of followers to become the dark forces we call devils. The Biblical book of Revelation describes the war in heaven that led to Satan's fall:

Scripture: And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. (Revelation 12:7)

Satan, the leader of these fallen angels, is not the opposite of God, but rather of the archangel Michael, who leads the host of heaven.

For centuries, there had been conflicting views on the origin and power of Satan. Manichaeism is a belief dating back to the third century that there are two supreme



beings: a force of goodness and light that is God, and a force of evil and darkness that is the devil. According to this theory, each human has both forces within him: the spirit which is the light, and the body which represents darkness. The Manichaens believed this dual nature is constantly at war, and when we succumb to evil, it is not of our own choosing, but rather the evil inside our body that overtakes us.

In the fourth century, the church officially condemned their heretical views in 561 A.D. at the Council of Braga. The council decreed:

Council: If anyone says that the devil was not first a good angel made by God, or that his nature was not the work of God, but claims that the devil sprang up from the darkness and had no creator at all, rather that he is himself the beginning and substance of evil...let him be anathema.

One of Manichaeism's most famous adherents was Saint Augustine, who followed the group for over eight years before experiencing a conversion to Christianity and denouncing the group he once considered as true. Interestingly, Lewis frequently cites Augustine as an influence on his philosophies and writings.

The battle over the nature and creation of Satan continued as some in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries embraced among other beliefs a writing known as *The Secret Supper*, which spoke of John questioning Jesus about a variety of mysteries including the origins of the world and the rebellion of Satan. This writing asserts that Satan created the world and

Adam and Eve were inhabited by the devil. The church railed against such beliefs at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, where they declared:

Council: The devil and the other demons were created by God good according to their nature, but they made themselves evil by their own doing. As for man, his sin is at the prompting of the devil.

As for Lewis, he held firmly to his belief Satan was not the opposite of God, but of Michael the archangel. He did admit, though, that his religion would not be in shambles if he was not correct on this point.

Even so, he knew that his opinion was of little consequence in how readers would receive his work. Some would view *The Screwtape Letters* as a literal description of Hell and devils while others would recognize its allegorical nature. Either view was acceptable, for the purpose of this diabolical conversation was not to indoctrinate its readers, but rather to stimulate a fascinating discourse on the sinful nature of man versus the redemptive nature of God.

[Part III]

Did God give each person free will? Or are we just pawns in an age-old game, advanced through a series of carefully orchestrated moves in a future that has already been laid out for us?

This conflict can be traced back to the very first humans: Adam and Eve. God created them and planted them in a lush paradise with everything they could ever desire: human and animal companionship, delicious food, meaningful work, and a life free of pain and death. There was just one condition: the couple could not eat the fruit of a certain tree, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for once they ate of its fruit, they would experience evil and shame and death. C.S. Lewis recognized the difficulty of this position. As he wrote in *The Problem of Pain*, “From the moment a creature becomes aware of God as God and of itself as self, the terrible alternative of choosing God or self for the centre is opened to it.”

So what, or who, would cause Adam and Eve to break the one rule that governed their happiness, to be forced to choose between God and self? It was none other than Satan, who appeared to Eve in the Garden of Eden as a talking serpent. He offered her this promise about the fruit of the tree of knowledge:

Scripture: And the serpent said unto the woman, You shall not surely die. For God does know that in the day you eat of it, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. – Genesis 3:4-5

In their desire for knowledge, Eve, and then Adam, ate of the fruit with disastrous consequences. According to the Biblical account of this event in the book of Genesis, they experienced shame for the first time and were forced to sew fig leaves together to cover their nakedness. Eve and all her daughters were punished with the promise of painful childbirths. Adam and Eve were banished from the garden and the plentiful ground was cursed, and, most importantly, the first human couple and all their descendents would now experience death. According to the Wisdom of Solomon in the Hebrew Apocrypha:

Apocrypha: For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity. Nevertheless through envy of the devil came death into the world: and they that do hold of his side do find it. (Wisdom of Solomon 2:24)

In the New Testament, we learn that even devout Christians like the Apostle Paul experienced spiritual and emotional challenges. He writes of a time when he was afflicted with what he called a “thorn in the flesh” and believed that a messenger of Satan was sent to torment him. Though it is not clear what the problem was, we do know that he asked for his trial to be removed. His prayer was not granted, as evidenced by the

Lord's response: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

While Screwtape admits that humans are easily tempted in difficult times, he also acknowledges that trials can deepen a person's relationship with God. He writes in one letter that it is dangerous to the cause of a person's damnation when they feel forsaken and still remain obedient to God's will.

Nowhere is this obedience to the Father truer than in the passion of Jesus Christ. The Bible records the agonizing prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane prior to his betrayal and arrest.

Scripture: O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me: not as I will but as You will. (Matthew 26:39)

The cup, however, did not pass from him, and Jesus endured physical and emotional torment before and during his crucifixion. One of the last words spoken from the cross revealed the depth of his anguish:

Scripture: And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying...My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46)

Jesus was actually quoting Psalm 22, an Old Testament prophecy of the events surrounding his suffering and death. His words were not an expression of doubt or hopelessness, but instead a cry of pain stemming from his separation from the Father and the crushing weight of the world's sin upon Him. The words revealed the depth of His love and obedience to the Father, the choosing of God and divine will over self.

[Part IV]

*The Screwtape Letters* explore the battle of good versus evil and the struggle of man to embrace God's will rather than his own selfish desires. Early in the letters, the apprentice tempter Wormwood informs his uncle that the young man, the patient as the devils call him, has become a Christian. The apprentice is concerned, but his more experienced mentor puts his mind at ease by teaching him that many people are recovered from the Enemy's camp, for religion can be twisted into self-righteousness and sincere spirituality can become false spirituality. Screwtape confides to the tempter that one of his greatest friends is the Church itself – not the mighty universal Church that has spanned the centuries and brought millions into its fold – but rather the local church, oblivious of the depth and might of its history and rich with a congregation of ordinary sinners and hypocrites. This church becomes a breeding ground for disillusionment and apathy. From there, the young man will be easily led astray as his prayers will become parrot-like and self-centered. He will become distracted easily. In fact, he could just as easily open a good book as spend time studying the Scriptures. His sense of false spirituality grows, and the situation looks promising for Wormwood.

Screwtape: Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing.

The devils do not stop at the corruption of the young man's religion. Their evil plans include every facet of the man's existence, especially those things he enjoys, even though the young man's pleasures may be good and pure in and of themselves. The Bible plainly states that God alone is the giver of all good things. James, the brother of Jesus, wrote that, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights."

This fact is a constant frustration to Screwtape. He acknowledges that while the "Lowerarchy" has used pleasure to corrupt many souls, it is really a pure and healthy invention in its own right. Pleasure becomes sin only when it is corrupted, distorted or forbidden. French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau claimed that, "everything that comes out of the hands of the Creator of all things is good" but "everything degenerates in the hands of man."

Screwtape: He has filled His world full of pleasures. There are things for humans to do all day long without His minding in the least – sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying, working... We fight under cruel disadvantage. Nothing is naturally on our side.

Screwtape and Wormwood strategize on ways to corrupt the pleasures of the young man's life. The patient makes friends with a couple he met at work, a worldly pair who are intelligent, wealthy, and skeptical, a couple whose value systems are in opposition to those of a Christian young man. Screwtape advises that this friendship should be



encouraged, for it further divides the young man between his spiritual self that he exhibits at church and around other Christians and his worldly self that takes over when he goes to work, makes friends and lives outside the sacrosanct boundaries of the spiritual realm.

The Scriptures warn against this very thing. The Apostle John wrote:

Scripture: Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (1 John 2:15)

When the patient meets a girl, Screwtape vigorously explores and debates the nature of love. He tells us that love is neither good or bad, except for the tendency of that feeling to move a person closer to the Enemy or nearer to the world below. But love can be corrupted by sexual temptation when the man is single and by infidelity caused by the horror of the “Same Old Thing” as the man tires of his wife after years of marriage. And what about love of a different nature, that of God for his creation? According to Screwtape, such love is not possible. All God’s talk of love must be a ruse to cover his true intentions, though Screwtape can only guess what those are.

The Apostle John writes that love comes from God, that God is love:

Scripture: Let us love one another, for love is of God, and every one that loves is born of God, and knows God. He that loves not knows not God; for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

God's love is unconditional and sacrificial. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* that while our emotions change, God remains constant. His love for us endures our sins and indifference and this love is

Lewis: ...quite relentless in its determination that we shall be cured of those sins, at whatever cost to us, at whatever cost to Him.

Satan's eternal punishment originates from his refusal to accept this unconditional love. Even Screwtape was forced to admit in one of the letters that if the fallen angels could ever grasp the truth of God's love, they would be able to reenter heaven.

Satan's, and consequently Screwtape's approach, is simple. They seek to destroy every pleasure and foster contempt in those places where love grows. In doing so, they turn us from loving, giving people to unhappy, selfish creatures.

[Part V]

Can good truly overcome evil? We need only turn to the last of the letters. The situation is grim for Screwtape.

Screwtape: One moment it seemed to be all our world: the scream of bombs, the fall of houses, the stink and taste of high explosive on the lips and in the lungs, the feet burning with weariness, the heart cold with horrors, the brain reeling, the legs aching: next moment all this was gone, gone like a bad dream, never again to be of any account.

World War Two was devastating in terms of loss of life and property as well as the horrific emotional toll caught up in its ravages.

While war might be a human invention, it can be used to bring about purposes of good and evil. The good is exhibited through virtuous actions of bravery and patriotism and the evil dwells in those actions rooted in hatred, cowardice and fear. Lewis believed that Satan enjoys the art of war when it brings out the worst in humanity and that it is one more opportunity which can be used to either bring us closer to God or alienate us from Him.

This belief is echoed in one of the book's final letters. Screwtape laments that war brings a temporary entertainment to those engaged in the corruption of men's souls, but what does it ultimately accomplish if it does not deliver those souls to the Father Below?

Screwtape: When I see the temporal suffering of humans who finally escape us, I feel as if I had been allowed to taste the first course of a rich banquet and then denied the rest. It is worse than not to have tasted it at all.

Throughout the Screwtape Letters we read about the struggle of the young man to avoid the temptations laid out for him by Screwtape and Wormwood. Now the young man is fully embroiled in the trappings of war and the final struggle to secure his damnation begins.

Centuries before Lewis at the Council of Trent, one of the church fathers described this final battle for the soul.

Council: Even if our adversary seeks occasions throughout the whole of life and goes about that he may devour our souls in any way he is able, there is no time at which he is more vehemently intent on using all the forces of his cunning to destroy us completely and, if possible, to disturb our trust in the divine Mercy, than when he sees the end of life approaching us.

Perhaps Screwtape knows his apprentice is losing the spiritual battle, for he encourages Wormwood to keep the patient safe so that the apprentice tempter might have further opportunity to secure the young man's damnation. Screwtape plainly admonishes his nephew that there is no margin for error.

Screwtape: The justice of Hell is purely realistic, and concerned only with results.

Bring us back food, or be food yourself.

So how can Wormwood keep from becoming fodder for Satan's banquet? By prolonging the death of his patient in the war. In the closing chapters of *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis reveals that the adversity of our middle years wears on our souls and weakens our resolve. The shiny newness of youth loses its luster, love loses its intensity, the hopes and dreams of young adulthood crash and burn in the reality of practical living, even the rhythm of life itself trades spontaneity for dull routine. These times are what Screwtape refers to as "excellent campaigning weather" for winning the soul.

And if life takes a different turn and we achieve success? According to Lewis, as rationalized by Screwtape, that's even better! It leads to the self-satisfaction that comes with affluence and ease and imbues us with a sense that this world offers everything we ever need. It supplants in the human mind the Bible's teaching that the riches and things of this world are corruptible.

Scripture: Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust does corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth or rust does corrupt, and where thieves do not break through or steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

This misguided prosperity is the desolation the great English poet William Wordsworth wrote about in the first couplet of a famed sonnet:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;

So does the young man escape eternal damnation? We learn his fate in the last letter as Screwtape admonishes his apprentice for letting the patient's soul slip through his fingers. The young man dies in battle and transcends to the realm of heaven, where he receives the clarity of his true self in the light of God's presence.

It is the enlightenment the Apostle Paul refers to when he wrote, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know even as I am known." (1 Corinthians 13:12)

Screwtape painfully acknowledges the transition from this world to the heavenly realm.

Screwtape: Just think what he felt at that moment; as if a scab had fallen from an old sore, as if he were emerging from a hideous, shell-like tetter, as if he shuffled off for good and all a defiled, wet, clinging garment...

The story is over. Good has once again defeated evil. The justice of Hell has been overthrown, the hunted has escaped, and the junior tempter returns to his uncle Screwtape without supplying the young man's soul, the feast for the table of his Father Below. So what does happen to Wormwood, the gullible apprentice devil?

Screwtape: As dainty a morsel as I ever grew fat on.

C.S. Lewis wrote over 40 books covering a variety of genres including theology, science fiction, children's literature and poetry. He died on November 22, 1963, though his death was overshadowed by the news that a president had been shot in Dallas, Texas.

Was *The Screwtape Letters* the literary vehicle by which Lewis explored his own demons and temptations? Not likely, though we'll never know for certain. What we do know is that Lewis knew the path to spiritual richness and the promise of an even better life to come. He wrote:

Lewis: Once a man is united to God, how could he not live for ever? Once a man is separated from God, what can he do but wither and die?