

C.S. LEWIS

AND THE DELIGHTFUL,
DIABOLICAL DARING OF LENT

A LENTEN COMPANION TO

“THE SCREWTAPE
LETTERS”

INTRODUCTION



The 40 days of Lent are about many things: preparing for Easter, reflecting on our lives, expanding our hearts and minds with spiritual exercise, and more. Why 40 days? It's an echo of the story of Jesus' adventure at the outset of his public ministry, led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days of being "tested by Satan" – essentially a kind of training program with a sparring partner (Mark 1:13; Matthew 4:1; Luke 4:2).

Accordingly, during this 40-day span, we too can train by "sparring" with whatever distractions, obstacles, or inclinations are holding us back from becoming the people God is calling us to be. What pulls us away from our true priorities? What obstructs our doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God? Lent is a time to join Jesus in the wilderness, reflecting on these questions, clarifying our insight, and renewing our resolve.

C.S. Lewis spent his life exploring these ancient rhythms of faith, and writing about how to bring them to life. In one of his early works of fiction, Lewis turned a satirical eye on the idea of "sparring with the devil" – and the result was one of his most beloved books, *The Screwtape Letters*, a playful, perceptive study of human life and struggle through the eyes of two fanciful characters: Wormwood, a young demon-in-training, and Screwtape, his uncle and mentor. Through 31 letters – by turns comic and devastating – Screwtape advises his nephew about how best to sabotage a human being's attempts to live a faithful, fruitful, beautiful life.

And so this Lenten season, what better way to participate in Jesus' 40 days of being "tested in the wilderness" than to walk with C.S. Lewis, leaning into the power of literature to provoke thought and inspire action. With humor, wit, and imagination, Lewis explores an array of familiar, everyday struggles – and thereby helps us chart a way forward, into the joy and renewal of Easter morning and beyond.

C.S. LEWIS: A SKETCH

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1898. After the family's dog, Jacksie, was killed by a car, four-year-old Clive insisted on being called "Jacksie," and later, "Jack," as he was known to family and friends for the rest of his life. This heartfelt relationship with animals was a sign of things to come: as a boy, Jack wrote about a fantasy world governed by animals – a precursor to the land of Narnia for which he would later become famous.

Young Jack's interests turned to Norse, Greek, and Irish mythology, and eventually to a scholarship to attend Oxford University in England. Soon after arriving, however, he enlisted in the British Army to serve in the "Great War" (now known as World War I). In France, Lewis experienced the horrors of trench warfare, and was wounded by an errant British shell. These traumatic events, along with the earlier death of his mother, left him both a pessimist and an atheist.

After the war, Lewis returned to his studies and eventually became a professor at Oxford, a position he held for the next three decades. It was there that his mind began to change: he formed a small writing group, "The Inklings," which included J.R.R. Tolkien, who encouraged him to reconsider Christianity. Influenced both by Tolkien and his reading of G.K. Chesterton, among others, Lewis converted to Christianity in 1931, at the age of 33. He workshopped *The Screwtape Letters* with The Inklings, publishing it in 1942 – and dedicating it to Tolkien. The book has since sold millions of copies.

During World War II, Lewis opened his Oxford home to child evacuees from London (a situation that serves as the opening premise for *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*). He also delivered brief theological reflections as radio broadcasts during the war, later collected into *Mere Christianity*. In the end, Lewis published more than 40 books, many translated into multiple languages. Late in life, he met and married the American writer, Joy Davidman, even as she struggled with terminal cancer; their relationship is chronicled in the acclaimed play and film, "Shadowlands." C.S. Lewis died in 1963, just shy of his 65th birthday.

A WORD ON “SATAN” AND “HELL”



Since *The Screwtape Letters* is written in a mocking, satirical style, Lewis playfully sidesteps the question of whether there actually are any such things as “Satan” and “hell” – and this makes the book accessible to a wide range of readers, from those who take it as a tongue-in-cheek portrait of human foibles to those who find it peppered with grains of metaphysical truth. And indeed, as we prepare to enter the book’s mischievous playground, it’s worth remembering that Christian tradition (including the Bible) contains a wide range of opinions on these matters.

For example, the earliest appearances of “Satan” in scripture, such as in the Book of Job, don’t feature him as a sinister figure with red tights, a pointy tail, and a pitchfork – but rather as a member of the divine court, a kind of “prosecutor” whose job it is to pose challenging questions for God to consider. When God muses about Job’s admirable conduct and devotion, the prosecutor (in Hebrew, *ha-satan*, “the accuser”) points out that this may well be due to the many blessings God has given Job: *Remove those advantages*, the accuser suggests, *and we’ll see what kind of person Job really is...*

There’s an echo of this prosecutorial, “testing” role for Satan in the Gospels, too. After Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness expressly to be “tested by Satan” for 40 days – not abandoning him to an adversary in a wasteland, but rather delivering him to a sparring partner in a “testing ground” where the Child of God can prepare for the challenges ahead.

Likewise with “hell”: the idea of an actual place of eternal torment seems conspicuously absent in some biblical passages, conspicuously present in others – and in still others, functions more as a poetic figure of speech than an actual state of affairs. For example, Jesus occasionally refers to “Gehenna,” sometimes translated as “hell” – but Gehenna was a smoldering trash dump on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and so the question isn’t *whether* Jesus used “Gehenna” as a figure of speech (since obviously he did), but rather precisely *what* that figure indicates:

an actual place? a poetic shorthand, like a parable, meant to motivate? a picture not of some other plane of existence encountered later on, but rather of the “hell-on-earth” we’re capable of creating here and now? (Gehenna, after all, was human-made and earthbound!)

Again, the point here isn’t to settle these questions, but rather to highlight the range of options within Christian tradition generally and the Bible’s library in particular – and at the same time, to underscore how Lewis’ approach in *The Screwtape Letters* (and in virtually all his literary work) is deliberately designed to be accessible to a wide range of readers. Indeed, Lewis typically wrote in a hospitable, ecumenical style, drawing together readers of different stripes to explore basic questions. He often spoke of “mere Christianity,” by which he meant Christian life as free as possible from denominational or sectarian divisions.

TIPS FOR READING “THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS”

1. Remember, this is “Screwtape” writing – so give everything a grain of salt! Lewis disagrees with most of Screwtape’s ideas, and we have to listen “through” the satire to hear Lewis’ voice.
2. This book was written in Britain in the 1940s, and so some of Screwtape’s ideas are dated, dominated by the ongoing war, or otherwise limited by the era.
3. Lewis sprinkles quotes and allusions throughout the text, and if you don’t understand a particular reference, don’t worry – just keep reading. If you’re curious, annotated editions of the book are available, and annotations can also be found online (just plug “Quotations and Allusions in C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*” into a search engine).
4. *The Screwtape Letters* is available as a free pdf online, as well as from booksellers for less than \$10. An annotated, anniversary edition is also available for around \$20 (and there’s even an audiobook read by John Cleese, of Monty Python fame! Highly recommended!).



ASH WEDNESDAY



READ

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The Screwtape Letters, Preface and Chapters 1 – 2

(Reader's Note: This book is available as a free pdf online, as well as from booksellers for less than \$10.)

REFLECT

Here in the midst of one of Jesus' most famous sermons, the so-called "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus zeroes in not on hazards of "irreligious" or "nonreligious" behavior, but precisely on hazards of religious practices. If we're not careful, giving, praying, fasting, and

indeed any number of other "holy" activities can be performed not out of genuine generosity or devotion, but rather in order to "be seen by others" (Matthew 6:5). Sacred practices, in other words, are fertile ground for hypocrisy – and Jesus warns us to be on guard. Temptations to self-absorption, self-congratulation, and self-aggrandizement abound.

As Lewis imagines him, Screwtape senses this vulnerability – and advises his nephew and temptor-in-training, Wormwood, to capitalize on it. Human beings, Screwtape explains, are easily distracted by their own interests: by hunger, by bus schedules, by "ordinary, real life" (including, we might add, our quite ordinary habit of doing things in order to "be seen by others" with admiration). And by the same token, we are easily drawn into arrogance. In this regard, Screwtape writes, "One of our great allies...is the Church itself," not least because any church is comprised of ordinary people, not saints – and so can be a "disappointing" place, with as much smugness, vice, and mediocrity as any other human community. And this disappointment, ironically enough, can tempt us to be smug, to look down our noses at others in the church (*look how smug they are!*), as well as at the church as a whole.

The antidote here, as both Jesus and Lewis suggest, is genuine humility. To give for the sake of benefiting others (not enhancing our status); to

pray “in secret,” as Jesus puts it (not showing off). And to regard our neighbors in the church and in the world not from a posture of smug judgment, but rather with appreciation and patience, recognizing that we, too, could use the same from them.

PRAY



God of love and grace, make us more loving, more graceful, more reflective of you, in whose image you have lovingly, gracefully made us. When we give, let us do so generously, for the sake of giving, not receiving. When we pray, let us do so genuinely, for the sake of connecting and communing with you. Give us the gift of humility, so we may humbly walk with you and with our neighbors. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

PRACTICE

TAKE AN INVENTORY: What in Jesus’ cautions, or in Lewis’ satirical warnings, rings true in your life? Where can you cultivate more humility? Which practices? Which areas of life?

DISCUSS: Is it possible to give without seeking congratulation (even from yourself)? Can we really give in a way that we “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”? What might this look like?

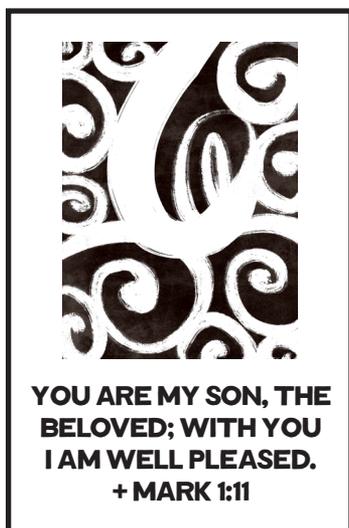
DISCUSS: Have you ever found the church “disappointing”? How does this section of Lewis’ book (Chapter 2) make you think about that disappointment?

DISCUSS: Lewis implies that both “logic” and “science” are supportive of faith, not antithetical to it – in part because the sciences encourage us to reflect on realities we can’t touch or see. Do you agree? Why or why not?

JOURNAL: Keep a Lenten journal for this 40-day season. Here at the outset, what changes would you like to make in your life? In your relationships? In your neighborhood? What skills would you like to develop?

TRY IT OUT: Pick a practice mentioned in the readings for this week (a financial gift, a prayer, reading a sacred text, or another practice), and try it out – taking careful note of your motivations, how it feels, and what effects it creates. How do Jesus’ sermon and Lewis’ book resonate with your experience? Share and explore this with a friend.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT



READ

Scripture: Mark 1:9-15

The Screwtape Letters, Chapters 3 – 4

REFLECT

As Mark tells it, Jesus' public ministry begins with his baptism, followed by 40 days in the wilderness to be "tempted by Satan" (Mark 1:12-13). The Holy Spirit alights on him, angels attend to him – but the overall emphasis in the story is on elemental, tangible, earthy details: the waters of baptism in the Jordan, the Spirit's embodiment as "a dove," the gritty adventure of a 40-day training

program in the wilderness. And above all, God's declaration at the baptism is strikingly warm, intimate, and familial: God doesn't say, "You are the Messiah!", but rather, "You are my Child, the Beloved."

Indeed, this emphasis on tangible, embodied, here-and-now love is a harbinger of Jesus' ministry to come. Accordingly, Lent is a season-long invitation to reconnect with the nit and grit of faith, a faith not merely of high-minded, abstract ideas, but also of everyday practices, as palpable as river water, desert dust, and the love between parent and child.

Screwtape understands this only too well, advising Wormwood to do all he can to turn the attention of "the patient" away from everyday relationships and "elementary duties" of daily life, and toward more abstract, supposedly "spiritual" concerns. *Urge the patient to pray for his mother's "soul," says Screwtape, not for his actual mother, the human being right there at the breakfast table, with her actual needs. Lure the patient into focusing on what he finds annoying in others – and ignoring his own shortcomings. If the patient insists on praying, don't worry – just prod the prayer to focus not on God, but on whether or not the patient is feeling sufficiently prayerful, or grateful, or forgiven, or whatever. In short, turn the patient's mind away from actual, tangible relationships – with God and neighbor – and toward various kinds of detachment and self-absorption.*

PRAY



God of creation and connection, who has made us to live in relationships with you and with our neighbors, strengthen our love. Give us the humility and boldness we need to change, and the patience and empathy we need to care for others. Let us pray and live in communion with you, and help us remember that we are all part of the Body of Christ, your Beloved, in whom you are well pleased. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

PRACTICE

TAKE AN INVENTORY: Where is your faith today most tangible and down-to-earth? Where is it vague or abstract? What "elementary duties" and relationships come to mind in your life, where you can put love more tangibly into practice?

DISCUSS: Do you experience God's love for you in palpable, everyday ways? How so? How not?

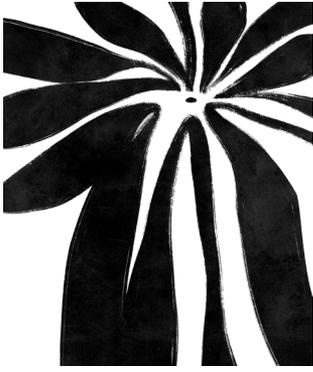
DISCUSS: In these chapters, Lewis playfully provokes us to consider: What day-to-day "irritations" in your life (say, with family or friends) could use an infusion of patience and compassion? What "double standards" need adjustment?

DISCUSS: How do Screwtape's descriptions reflect (or not) your experience of prayer? Do you at times focus on your feelings, or picture an image or object, or keep things abstract and "spiritual," rather than specific and tangible?

JOURNAL: In your Lenten journal, reflect on the readings and discussion questions above, and how they resonate with you in your life right now. Where do you sense the Spirit's encouragement to develop new strengths and flexibility?

TRY IT OUT: In light of Lewis' suggestions, experiment with prayer this week: for example, pray for the tangible, specific needs of others, and seek to encounter God in a way that sets aside (or holds lightly) your preconceived ideas about God. Or try this: if you start from the premise that you are, as part of the Body of Christ, God's beloved, in whom God is well pleased – how does your practice of prayer change? Share and explore this with a friend.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT



**IF ANY WANT TO BECOME
MY FOLLOWERS, LET
THEM DENY THEMSELVES
AND TAKE UP THEIR
CROSS AND FOLLOW ME.
+ MARK 8:34**

READ

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

The Screwtape Letters,
Chapters 5 – 7

REFLECT

The cross is a great mystery, with many aspects and layers of meaning – and here, in this passage in Mark, Jesus presents the cross not only as an ordeal he will soon undergo, but also as an icon for a way of living that his followers, each in their own way, must be prepared to embrace. What way of living, exactly? Jesus calls it “taking up their cross,” a kind of courageous generosity, letting go of self-absorbed

attempts to “save your own life”: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34-35).

In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis provides an example of what this way of living might look like in practice. He wrote the book in the midst of World War II, while Britain was under relentless bombardment from German air raids, and millions of Britons were serving in the armed forces (in the end, the United Kingdom would suffer some 720,000 casualties). Fear and suffering was everywhere, interwoven with courage, determination, and hope.

In this context, for Lewis, “taking up one’s cross” meant persevering through the tribulation of wartime – not passively receiving it, but rather actively “taking it up” with as much dignity and poise as possible. And via *Screwtape*, Lewis indirectly makes a recommendation: rather than focusing on what *might* happen, on the suffering we’re afraid of, we are wise to stay focused on whatever suffering is actually happening in our lives today, including our fear itself. It’s a realistic psychological strategy

for times of struggle, reminiscent of Jesus' teaching, "Do not worry about tomorrow... Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matthew 6:34). In other words, whatever part of today's suffering is unavoidable is the "cross" we must "take up" – resisting the temptation to obsess over endless hypotheticals about tomorrow.

PRAY



God of compassion and resurrection, give us the poise we need to live with suffering, the wisdom we need to avoid or alleviate it when possible, and the kindness we need to attend to the suffering of others, near and far. Help us to live with courageous generosity. Thank you for walking with us on the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrows – which is also the Way of Resurrection and Renewal. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

PRACTICE

TAKE AN INVENTORY: What suffering are you carrying today? What fears of future suffering? In what ways are you trying to "save yourself" – and which ones might you let go? What forms of self-absorption can you relinquish?

DISCUSS: What does the mystery of the cross mean to you? Which of its many aspects resonate most strongly (God's companionship with us in our suffering; God's transformation of death into new life, violence into peace and mercy; God canceling out any "debt" we think we owe to God; and so on)?

DISCUSS: One of the ideas Lewis wrestled with throughout his life was that suffering, at least in some respects, shouldn't be conceived as merely negative, meaningless, or godforsaken – but rather as sometimes, somehow related to our maturation, and even to our redemption. Do you agree? What roles, positive and negative, has suffering played in your life so far – and how do you think about God in relation to those experiences?

DISCUSS: At the end of Chapter 6, Screwtape encourages Wormwood to push the patient's benevolence (and other virtues) out into the realm of theory and fantasy, applying not to nearby family, co-workers, and neighbors, but rather to "people he does not know." Does this critique ring a bell in your life? What virtues would you like to incorporate more fully into your innermost habits? Which of your values is God calling you to embody closer to home?

JOURNAL: In your Lenten journal, reflect on the readings and discussion questions above, and how they resonate with you in your life right now. Where do you sense the Spirit's invitation to understand suffering, the cross, and resurrection in new ways?

TRY IT OUT: In light of Lewis' suggestions, experiment with consciously "taking up" whatever unavoidable suffering you encounter this week. Let go of self-absorption by serving others with courageous generosity: for example, by volunteering for a local organization making your community a better place. And as you do, embody the joyful compassion of the Gospel as best you can. Share and explore your experiences with a friend.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT



READ

Scripture: John 2:13-22

The Screwtape Letters, Chapters 8 – 12

REFLECT

As John tells it, Jesus' public ministry begins in earnest at the world's most prestigious place (from a Jewish perspective), the Jerusalem Temple, near the calendar's most prestigious time, the Passover festival. Jesus stirs up an angry ruckus, driving out vendors and money changers – in effect enacting the prophet Zechariah's vision of an era when "there shall no longer be traders in the house of God" (Zechariah 14:21).

Why were the traders there in the first place? To support the Temple's sacrificial system: worshipers would first exchange their money for the permitted currency, and then purchase animals – cattle, sheep, doves – to sacrifice on the Temple grounds. Zechariah seems to be envisioning a more direct, intimate relationship between God and humanity, without



**THERE SHALL NO
LONGER BE TRADERS
IN THE HOUSE OF GOD.
+ ZECHARIAH 14:21**

the intermediate layer of the sacrificial system – and Jesus picks up this mantle. It's as if he declares, *A new era of God-with-us is dawning: and so the world's conventional patterns and systems – “business as usual” – need to be cleared away!*

And such “business as usual,” of course, isn't limited to temples. It's everywhere we turn – and Screwtape counsels Wormwood to continually coax his patient into conventional prejudices and patterns whenever possible. Which ones? In the religious sphere, a prejudice in favor of “peak experiences” and against periods of “dryness and dullness”

(which actually, Lewis suggests, are crucial to the life of faith). In the social sphere, a prejudice in favor of the “rich,” “superficial,” “skeptical,” “purely fashionable,” “flippant,” and so on, and against humility, depth, and sincerity. And in the personal sphere, a lure into merely going through the motions of churchgoing, and slipping into numb, banal boredom.

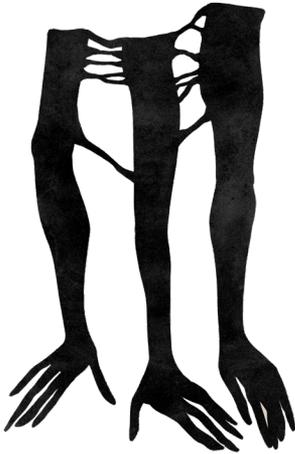
PRAY



God of the blooming garden and the fallow field, the lively and the dormant, give us the trust, insight, and perspective we need to walk with you each day, through the troughs as well as the peaks. Remind us how valuable the troughs can be. Help us set aside the intermediate layers, the “business as usual” that creates distance from you. Keep us humble, joyful, and vibrant. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

PRACTICE

TAKE AN INVENTORY: Picking up on Lewis' “Law of Undulation,” in your journey of faith, are you currently in a peak, or a trough (or a bit of both)? What “business as usual,” what conventional prejudices or patterns, need to be cleared away?



**MY DEAR WORMWOOD,
HAS NO ONE EVER TOLD
YOU ABOUT THE LAW
OF UNDULATION?
+ C.S. LEWIS,
“THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS”**

DISCUSS: According to the Gospel of John, Jesus is furious about the vendors and money changers in the Temple. Why do you think he’s angry? In your opinion, what about the sacrificial system might have made Zechariah envision its removal – and made Jesus so passionate to realize that vision?

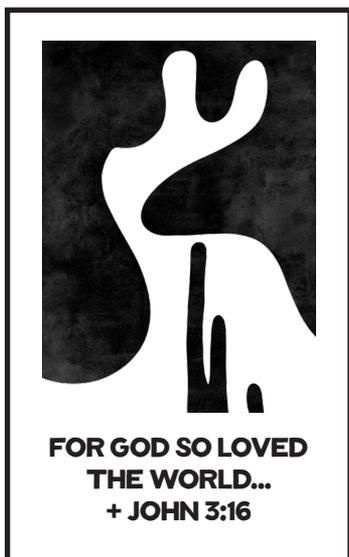
DISCUSS: How has what Lewis calls “the Law of Undulation” affected your faith over your life so far? What peaks and troughs have you experienced?

DISCUSS: Lewis argues that “trough” periods are actually among the most valuable times of faith development. Do you agree? Why or why not? Is there anything in your life experience that resonates (or not) with Lewis’ case?

JOURNAL: Inspired by Lewis’ idea of “undulation,” write a brief spiritual autobiography, laying out the primary periods (peaks and troughs) you’ve experienced so far. Pay close attention to the blessings and challenges each period provided.

TRY IT OUT: We may not sacrifice animals during worship, but the conventional elements we do routinely practice can become hindrances to relationship with God. Try reframing or changing up a conventional practice in order to experience it anew. For example, write out the parts of the Lord’s Prayer, and pray them in reverse order (“Yours is the kingdom, the power, and glory forever. Deliver us from evil, and lead us not into temptation. As we forgive those who sin against us, forgive us for our sins. Give us this day our daily bread...”) Notice how this simple twist can renew our understanding and experience of the prayer.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT



READ

Scripture: John 3:14-21

The Screwtape Letters, Chapters 13 – 17

REFLECT

The Greek word traditionally translated as “so” in the famous verse, “For God so loved the world...” does not mean “to a great degree,” but rather “in this way” (as in, “like so”). Thus the verse may be more clearly translated, “For God loved the world in this way...” What way? In the same passage, the author of the Gospel of John makes an evocative comparison, as if to say: *In the way God loved the world when Moses lifted the*

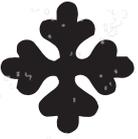
serpent up in the wilderness; in this same way, the Child of Humanity must be lifted up for all to see...

Now, in the ancient story Jesus is referencing here (from Numbers 21), the Israelites are complaining bitterly in their wilderness wanderings, and God sends serpents among them as a kind of consequence or manifestation of their self-destructive complaints – and when the people repent, God tells Moses to fashion a serpent out of bronze and lift it up on a pole for the people to look upon, and be healed, and live. The saving remedy, then, includes a clear reminder of the original predicament. Put another way: the healing pathway of repentance involves contemplating the cause of the trouble.

And God loves the world “in this way”: continually calling us onto that healing pathway of repentance, of growth, of maturation, wisely stepping away from the causes of trouble, and at the same time stepping toward the wellsprings of health and new life. Screwtape scolds Wormwood for allowing the patient to experience “repentance and renewal,” and in particular, for failing to distract him from two “real positive Pleasures” (a book and a walk), each of which serves as “a touchstone of reality.”

To salvage the situation, Screwtape advises several actions: entice the patient away from translating his repentance into action; call his attention to any burgeoning humility (so he takes pride in it!), or distort that humility into self-contempt, rather than the “new kind of self-love” humility makes possible; encourage the patient to focus on the uncertain future, not the tangible present – in short, to lure the patient as far from reality as possible. And this implies, of course, that for Lewis, the way of repentance – the way of maturation and discipleship – is meant to do the opposite: to bring us closer in touch with reality.

PRAY



God of healing and renewal, thank you for loving the world in this way: for giving us pathways of course-correction and maturation; for blessing us with “real positive Pleasures” in our lives; for empowering us to become more humble, and through that humility, to love you and our neighbors and ourselves more fully. Give us the confidence we need to change, to grow, to repent. Bring us closer to reality. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

PRACTICE

TAKE AN INVENTORY: Inspired by Lewis’ description, what are some “real positive Pleasures” in your life? What steps toward maturation would you like to take? What healing? What repentance, which is to say, what change, growth, renewal?

DISCUSS: The cross can be understood from many different angles. How does comparing it to Moses’ “lifted up” bronze serpent, as the author of John’s Gospel seems to do in this passage, enrich your understanding of the cross? If the cross, too, is a healing pathway for repentance that involves contemplating the cause of the trouble – what “trouble” does the cross (and the Passion more generally) cause us to contemplate? Violence, suffering, betrayal, injustice...?

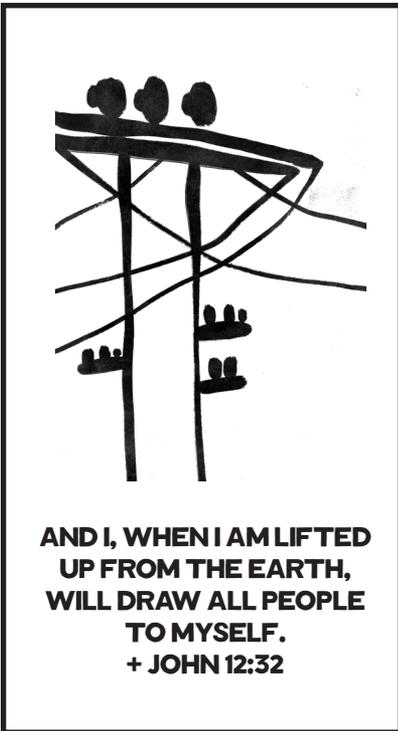
DISCUSS: In Chapter 16, Lewis implicitly recommends a “temper” or stance for listening to sermons, in which the listener listens critically, but “does not waste time in thinking about what it rejects, but lays itself open in uncommenting, humble receptivity to any nourishment.” Do you agree? How do you listen to sermons?

DISCUSS: In Chapter 17, what does Screwtape mean by “gluttony of Delicacy, not gluttony of Excess”? Do you recognize any of either sort in your life?

JOURNAL: In a striking passage in Chapter 14, Lewis contends that God wants to bring people to a “state of mind” in which they “could design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in the fact without being any more (or less) or otherwise glad at having done it than he would be if it had been done by another.” Have you ever experienced this state of mind, this blend of humility and affirmation? Reflect on this topic in your journal.

TRY IT OUT: Make a short list (or a long list!) of your “real positive Pleasures,” and make time for each of them this week. After each one, reflect on Lewis’ idea that they serve as “touchstones of reality.” Share and discuss this with a friend.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT



READ

Scripture: John 12:20-33

The Screwtape Letters,
Chapters 18 – 24

REFLECT

In these letters, Screwtape counsels Wormwood as to how to manipulate the patient’s personal life – at times veering into 1940s-style sexism, and at times exploring sexuality, marriage, love, and community in thought-provoking ways. For example, “the whole philosophy of Hell,” Screwtape declares, is that “one self is not another self,” and so all are embroiled in a zero-sum, competitive, dog-eat-dog existence. God’s philosophy, which Screwtape finds incomprehensible, is the opposite: “Things are to be many,

yet somehow also one. The good of one self is to be the good of another.” This “impossibility” God calls, “love” – and the communion of sex, the

intimacy of life partnership, and the companionship of family are all meant to be emblems, embodiments, and training grounds for the practice of love in our lives.

Accordingly, Screwtape sets out to sabotage the patient in each of these arenas: encouraging both brutality and unattainable beauty standards in sexuality; unrealistic expectations in marriage; petty resentments in family life; and religious chauvinism in community. This last contamination is what Screwtape exalts as “the strongest and most beautiful of the vices – Spiritual Pride”: contempt for supposed outsiders, those who don’t “believe what we believe.” Disguised as a form of faith, spiritual pride actually stands against the practices of love and humility to which God calls us every day.

Guardrails against spiritual pride run along many of the highways and byways of scripture. For example, at a climactic turn in John’s Gospel, Jesus proclaims, “The hour has come for the Child of Humanity to be glorified... And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:23-32). All people! Not “all Jews” or “all Christians,” never mind some subset of a subset who “believe what we believe” – but rather all people everywhere. In humility, we dare not look down on anyone, no matter the particulars; and in love, we can only trust and pray that in the end, the God of love will embrace us all.

PRAY



God of beloved community, draw our whole lives – our committed relationships, our sexual intimacy, our friendships, our families – into your broad, beautiful pattern of love and grace. Leave nothing and no-one out; bring everything and everyone in. And open our minds and hearts so that we, too, can be agents of your communion and care. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

PRACTICE

TAKE AN INVENTORY: Do you think of your personal life – your most significant relationships, your sexuality, your family life – as an arena in which you can embody and strengthen your God-given ability to love? How so? How not (or how not yet)?

DISCUSS: What spiritual pride do you notice in the world today (including in yourself)? In what ways do Jesus’ teachings help us guard

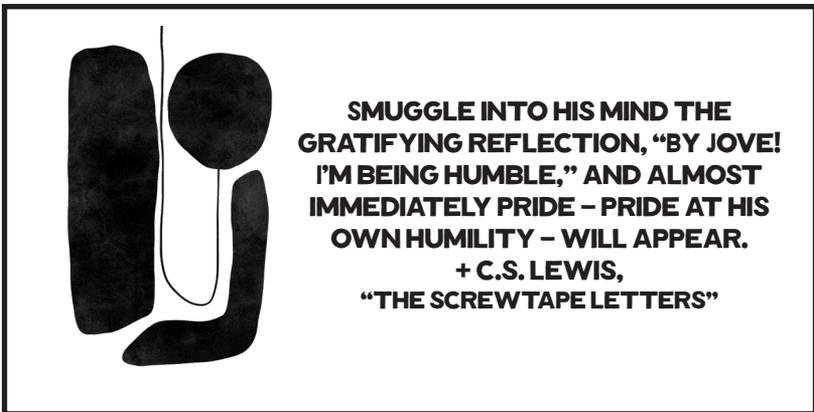
against it? (For example, his declared love for in “all people”; or the Good Samaritan parable, where a religious outsider is the model (Luke 10); or his warnings against practicing religion in order to “be seen by others” (Matthew 6:5)...)

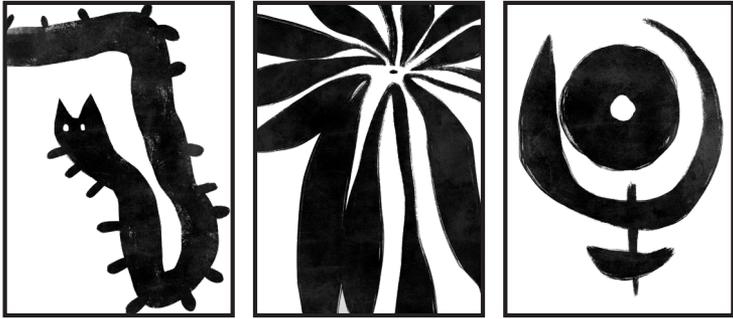
DISCUSS: Many people imagine that sexuality and religion are two separate spheres, or that they only overlap insofar as religion places moral limits on sexual activity. But Lewis suggests a more positive connection, framing sexuality as a key emblem and example of the communion of love. Do you agree? How might thinking this way change how you think about and experience sexuality?

DISCUSS: Screwtape presents both impossible beauty standards and ever-shifting trends in what’s considered “attractive” as forms of sabotaging human sexuality. In what ways have these dynamics influenced your life?

JOURNAL: List the most significant relationships in your life today. How do this week’s readings make you think about how they’re going? What expectations, irritations, or resentments need to be adjusted or relinquished? What understanding, patience, or kindness need to be cultivated?

TRY IT OUT: Translate your reading and reflection (for example, in the journal exercise above) into three concrete, doable goals for participating this week in your key relationships in more loving, constructive ways. Challenge yourself to put love into practice! Share and discuss these goals with a confidante.





HOLY WEEK

PALM SUNDAY



**HOSANNA! BLESSED
IS THE ONE WHO
COMES IN THE NAME
OF THE LORD!
+ MARK 11:9**

READ

Scripture: Mark 11:1-11

The Screwtape Letters,
Chapters 25 – 27

REFLECT

For Mark, Jesus' jubilant entry into Jerusalem is essentially a piece of street theater dramatizing the prophet Zechariah's ancient vision: the long-awaited divine monarch arrives on a humble donkey, announcing "peace to the nations" (Zechariah 9:9-10). *Shout hosanna! The new era, the Great Jubilee, has begun!*

The crowds step up and play their part in this celebratory drama – and the fact that they so quickly become indifferent

or turn against Jesus (popular calls to crucify him ring out only a few days later) indicates that their initial enthusiasm likely had some strings attached. An expectation, for example, that Jesus would raise an army and conquer the Romans, or an assumption that he would immediately usher in a heavenly paradise: something radically new, something thrilling, something better, something now.

Screwtape reports that over the years, he and his colleagues have encouraged humanity to persistently "demand...absolute novelty," "infinite change," and so to abhor "the Same Old Thing." In this way, the understandable human desire for positive change can be twisted into impetuous entitlement and frustration. Even *caritas* (charity), Screwtape insists, once replaced by "unselfishness," can be warped into something self-serving and conflictual, the very opposite of graceful love. Likewise, the great mystery of prayer can be transformed into an occasion for convoluted critique. Screwtape's whole mission, it turns out, isn't to create, but rather to distort strong things into weak ones, helpful into unhelpful, life-giving into death-dealing – "Hosanna!" into "Crucify him!"

PRAY



God of hope and deliverance, give us the joy of your Great Jubilee, and the wisdom to hold it rightly. Give us patience – and also impatience, each when it is fitting. Give us charity – but not its condescending, self-absorbed counterfeit. Give us your blessings – and teach us how to hold them, share them, nurture them, and live them out. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

PRACTICE

TAKE AN INVENTORY: Is there enough joy, are there enough “hosannas” in your life? What blessings – large and small, near and far, connected to you and connected to others – are worth celebrating with all your heart?

DISCUSS: Palm Sunday includes celebrating the dawning of God's Great Jubilee. What divine deliverance, what graceful salvation, what great transformation do you long for in the world today? What glimpses of it do you already see? How do you, and how can you, support these glimmers of love and justice with your time, talent, and treasure?

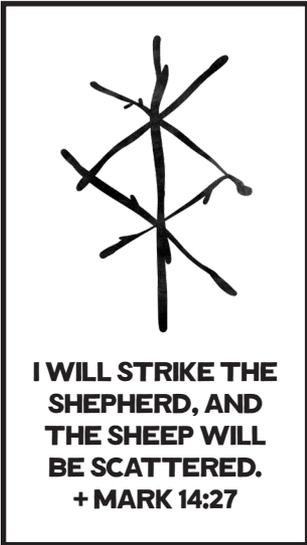
DISCUSS: Via Screwtape, Lewis describes the contrast between genuine “charity” and “unselfishness” this way: the former is generosity “so that others may be happy,” and the latter is “to surrender benefits” so that you may be considered (by others and yourself) as “unselfish in forgoing them.” When have you acted in these various ways?

DISCUSS: Screwtape stereotypically, wrongly ascribes different sorts of “unselfishness” to women and men, respectively. But the distinction itself (distributed according to personality type, not gender) is intriguing: one one side, those who perform “unselfishness” by “taking trouble for others” (or “doing good offices” for others); and on the other side, those who perform it by “not giving trouble to others” (or “respecting other people's rights”). For Screwtape, each of these two broad groups is primed to judge the other as selfish: the first because the second doesn't serve others enough, and the second because the first doesn't give others enough space and autonomy. What do you make of this distinction? Do you tend one way or the other?

JOURNAL: As we enter Holy Week, how do these readings resonate in your life today? What blessings do you recognize in your life – and to what distortions are those blessings vulnerable?

TRY IT OUT: You may have heard of a “gratitude list” – but this week, try a “hosanna list,” an catalog of benefits in your life, the lives of others around you, and the wider world that are worthy of gratitude, yes, but even more, worthy of praise and jubilation, of shouting “Hosanna!” and parading through the streets if we could. Here’s an example: since 1950, human infant mortality has declined from about 25% (1 in 4 infants dying) to just under 4% today (1 in 25 infants). This is one of the most breathtaking developments in our lifetimes, one that future historians will surely single out. Shout “Hosanna!” – and share and discuss your “hosanna list” with a friend.

MAUNDY THURSDAY AND GOOD FRIDAY



READ

Scripture: John 13:1-17, 31b-35,
Mark 14:12-50, John 18:1 – 19:42

The Screwtape Letters,
Chapters 28 – 31

REFLECT

After the jubilant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus now descends the steps toward his greatest trial: his passion, death, and resurrection. The Gospel of Mark is 16 chapters long, the first half describing his healing and teaching ministry, and the second half, zooming in and slowing down, describing the last several days of his life.

Wormwood’s “patient” also undergoes an end-of-life ordeal in these final few letters, and Screwtape advises his nephew to prey on his subject’s weakness at every turn – particularly on “cowardice,” which Screwtape calls the only “purely painful” vice, and also the “one vice of which they feel genuine shame.” One way of reading these texts together, then, is to use Lewis’ book to help us imagine Jesus’ harrowing journey: for example, his wrestling with courage and cowardice in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42).

But reading Lewis alongside the passion narratives can also help us explore a dimension of those stories we often overlook or de-emphasize: the harrowing journey traveled not by Jesus, but by his followers. Bewildered and devastated, they fully succumb to cowardice; they betray and desert Jesus, despite their brave words at the Passover meal; they deny, scatter, and flee in fear; some women stay around, but even they “look on from a distance” (Mark 15:40). Indeed, the Gospel writers go out of their way to underscore these aspects of the story, with striking detail and repetition. What’s going on here?

Lewis gives us a clue. Screwtape highlights cowardice and despair as the supposedly greatest of all sins, and the Gospels depict Jesus’ followers as falling into precisely these states in arguably the most extreme way imaginable. Think of it – if there was ever an unforgivable trespass, an indelible shame, an appalling infidelity, surely this is it: betraying and deserting God, with cowardice and despair, such that God is mocked, desecrated, and killed. Surely, for the disciples, this is the damnable point of no return.

And yet! From this point of view, the striking, surprising turn in the overall story isn’t merely that Jesus rises again, but rather that the risen Jesus immediately returns to his disgraced followers – and embraces them. Forgives them. Greets them with the astonishing words, “Peace be with you,” and then gives them the Holy Spirit (John 20:21-22). And so we may ask: if God forgives and saves and commissions even in this most extreme case, if even “the greatest sins” are decisively swept aside by divine mercy – what could ever stand between us, or indeed anyone, and the gracious love of God?

And not only that: Jesus anticipates all of this, telegraphs it at the Last Supper, and thereby co-opts and transfigures the coming violence into a nourishing meal of liberation (“Take, eat - this is my body, broken for you”), the coming estrangement into nothing less than intimate Communion. His resurrection and return, seen in this light, is a continuation of this amazing grace at the table.

PRAY



God of grace and mercy, as we walk this Via Dolorosa, this Way of Sorrows with you this week, enliven our imaginations not only to Jesus’ journey, but also to the journey of his followers, including us. The cowardice, the despair, the

disappointments, the broken hearts – and most of all, your astonishing, all-embracing mercy, unveiled at the Last Supper: even as we fall away, your loving, gracious refusal to let us go. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

PRACTICE

TAKE AN INVENTORY: In what ways are courage and cowardice, determination and despair, dignity and shame, interweaving in your life these days? How might the good news of God's astonishing mercy humble and inspire you in the days and weeks ahead?



DISCUSS: Both the Last Supper and the cross-and-resurrection can be understood from a range of vantage points. In what way(s) do you understand these great mysteries? How do these readings confirm, or enrich, or differ from your experience?

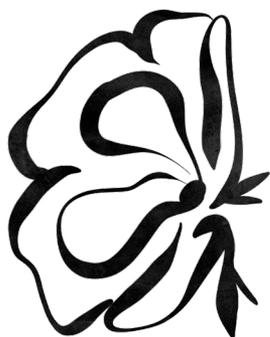
DISCUSS: In Chapter 29, Screwtape writes, "Pilate was merciful till it became risky." How are courage and cowardice woven through the passion narratives in Mark and John?

DISCUSS: Emphasizing God's merciful forgiveness in the passion narratives doesn't give us license to sin – but it can shift our motivations in important ways. Taking God's mercy seriously means we can endeavor to mature, and grow, and become the people God is calling us to be, not because our efforts will cause God to embrace us (for God has already done that!), but rather out of joy and gratitude for that embrace. Do you agree? In what ways do your efforts to mature and grow proceed (or not) on the basis of joy and gratitude?

JOURNAL: In Chapter 30, Screwtape describes a psychological tendency in which we interpret brutal, appalling, or devastating events as "revelations of Reality," and kind, joyful, or lovely events as "subjective" and fleeting, and so somehow less "real." Do you notice this tendency in yourself, or the world around you?

TRY IT OUT: Inspired by John's story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, challenge yourself this week to enact love in a way that tangibly embodies the "new commandment" to love others as Jesus has loved us (John 13:34-35). And if the particular way you choose requires some courage, so much the better!

EASTER SUNDAY



**“DO NOT BE ALARMED;
YOU ARE LOOKING FOR
JESUS OF NAZARETH,
WHO WAS CRUCIFIED.
HE HAS BEEN RAISED;
HE IS NOT HERE.”
+ MARK 16:6**

READ

Scripture: John 20:1-18,
Mark 16:1-8

REFLECT

There’s an undercurrent of dualism – a divide between “pure spirit” and “animal,” “soul” and “body,” “heaven” and “earth” – running through Screwtape’s writing, including in his last letter, where he scolds Wormwood for having let “a soul slip through your fingers”; or in Chapter 28, when he sums up his mission as “attaching [human beings] to earth,” as opposed to letting them escape into “heaven,” which Screwtape clearly envisions as somewhere else.

But the Incarnation and Resurrection give the lie to this way of thinking (and as Lewis puts it in the Preface, “the devil is a liar”). At Christmas, Jesus arrives not as “spirit,” but as God’s Word made flesh, dwelling among us. At Easter, Jesus rises from the tomb not as “spirit,” but as a wounded, graceful, fully human being. And on the last day, according to the visionary poetry of the Book of Revelation, human beings won’t “go up to heaven” – on the contrary, the New Jerusalem, the poet declares, comes down to earth.

The meaning of Christmas, the meaning of Easter, the meaning of Jesus’ opening proclamation, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17) – in the end, these three meanings are in harmony.

God’s graceful mercies are without end, and heaven comes to us!



CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!



ALLELUIA!



NOTES



Thoughts, insights, favorite lines from Lewis, or commitments you'd like to carry with you from the 40 days of Lent into the 50 days of Eastertide...



LENTEN EVENTS

