



## C.S. Lewis's Humble and Thoughtful Gift of Letter Writing

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Is it a sin to love Aslan, the lion of Narnia, more than Jesus? This was the concern expressed by a nine-year-old American to his mother after reading *The Chronicles of Narnia*. How does a mother respond to a question like that? In this case, she turned straight to the author of Narnia, C.S. Lewis, by writing him a letter. At the time, Lewis was receiving hundreds of letters every year from fans. Surely a busy scholar, writer, and Christian apologist of international fame wouldn't have the time to deal with this query from a child. And yet Lewis took time out of his busy schedule to answer the letter thoughtfully and carefully. He encouraged the boy, suggested a prayer for him to pray, and then wrote, "And if Mr. Lewis has worried any other children by his books or done them any harm, then please forgive him and help him never to do it again."<sup>1</sup>

Lewis's response is both simple and profound and reveals a heart that had been softened and molded by the work of the Holy Spirit. And while the letter is unique and personal, it is just one of thousands that flowed from the mind of Lewis through pen and ink to people around the globe. Lewis's letters touched lives in the past and still minister to us today.

Interestingly, this type of letter writing is reminiscent of another great letter writer, the apostle Paul, who wrote tenderly, "To Timothy, my dear son . . . I thank God . . . as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy" (2 Tim. 1:2–4 NIV). The letters of Paul, Peter, John, James, and Jude that fill our New Testament give witness to the power of letters to be used by God to disciple and nourish followers of Jesus. While the letters of C.S. Lewis cer-

tainly cannot be compared in inspiration and authority to the canon of the Holy Scriptures, it is clear that letter writing is a gift and ministry that when developed and shared with others can still influence lives for the kingdom of God. In fact, Lewis's comment about Charles Lamb, the British writer, could apply to his own letters, "You'll find his letters as good as his essays: indeed they are almost exactly the same, only more of it."<sup>2</sup>

Letter writing was much more common in the early twentieth century than it is today, as it was the primary means of long-distance communication. Without the entertainment distractions of television, YouTube, and other modern media, people used their spare time to engage in conversation with one another over a cup of tea or through the art of written correspondence. Lewis himself was sent off to boarding school at a young age and, being a dutiful son, wrote letters home to his father. He delighted in writing more than three hundred letters during his lifetime to his best childhood friend, Arthur Greeves. And he faithfully wrote to his brother, Warnie, who served overseas in the British Army.

Lewis was a naturally gifted letter writer, and a great conversationalist and storyteller, reflecting the Irish gift of "blarney" from his homeland. And yet in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis admits how much he disliked the labor of letter writing. He writes that in an ideal life "a man would have almost no mail and never dread the postman's knock."<sup>3</sup>



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However, something changed in his letter writing when he committed himself to following Jesus Christ. Lewis realized that if Jesus was who He claimed to be, then everything in his own life had to change, for, as Lewis wrote in his essay titled "Christian Apologetics," "One must keep on pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of *no* importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."<sup>4</sup> As a result of this conviction, Lewis was committed to use all means of communication at his disposal to point others toward the truth that made sense out of history, art, philosophy, culture, religion, and all of life.

Letter writing became one of the vehicles by which Lewis could share the beauty, truth, and goodness of God with others. Having written letters all of his life prior to his conversion, it was natural for Lewis to continue to reply to letters received, just as he continued to engage in rambunctious conversation with his friends at the pub following his discovery of Christ. The difference was that now letter writing and conversations could be redeemed as natural outlets for Lewis to live out his faith. Perhaps the biggest difference in his pre- and post-conversion letter writing, besides the focus of his letters, was the sheer volume of letters to which he responded. Lewis received thousands of letters over the course of his lifetime once his books became known globally. Not only did he reply to the mother of an American boy, but he also wrote thousands of letters to friends, family members, and fans of his books and radio broadcasts, students, scholars, pastors, men in the armed forces, and others. Blogger Brenton Dickieson estimates that we have approximately 3,274 handwritten surviving letters of Lewis.<sup>5</sup>

Lewis never learned to type, because he had only one joint in his thumbs, and the clackety-clack of the keys on the manual typewriter disturbed his thinking. The tactile dipping of the pen in ink, and the flow of the pen across the paper enabled him to write almost effortlessly. In fact, Lewis considered himself to be a "dinosaur" who didn't want modern technology to distract him and upset his rhythm of life.

Many of Lewis's handwritten letters have been published in a three-volume set edited by Lewis's literary executor, Walter Hooper, titled, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*. Other individual collections are titled *Letters to Children*, *Letters to an American Lady*, *They Stand Together: The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves*, *The Latin Letters of C.S. Lewis*, and *Letters of C.S. Lewis* saved and organized by his brother, Warren Lewis.

On top of these handwritten letters we could add the more than twelve thousand letters that Lewis's brother, Warnie, typed with two fingers on his old Royal typewriter to help Lewis keep up with his commitment to personally reply to each letter received. Warnie lightened the work load for Lewis as he opened the mail and distinguished between the typical fan mail that could be dealt with by a standard reply and those gems that he felt Lewis would want to address more personally. Douglas Gresham, Lewis's stepson, writes,

*...amongst the usual clutter of Jack's [Lewis's] morning mail . . . Jack received letters from all over the world, most of which Warnie would answer for Jack and then take to Jack for his approval and signature. Jack could not type, and his handwriting was not exactly the most legible in the world, so Warnie handled the bulk of his correspondence.<sup>6</sup>*

Even with Warnie's help, Lewis would spend an average of two hours each morning at his desk with pen and paper in hand, diligently and faithfully replying to his pen pals from around the world. And he did this for more than twenty years once he became a celebrated author and radio personality.

So perhaps the obvious question is why? Why in the midst of his busy life of tutoring, lecturing, writing, worshipping, caring for family members, and visiting with friends, did Lewis spend so much of his precious time replying to letters from children, women, and men from around the world?

One answer is that Lewis took seriously Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew: "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matt. 18:6 NIV). Lewis had a soft spot for children and a desire to tenderly care for and guide them. This was in part due to his own emotional and physical loss of love and security upon the death of his mom at age nine. He also endured the cruelty that was common in the English boarding schools of his day and the abuse of an insane boarding school principal. He didn't want to repeat the sins of his father, nor of those adults in his early life who failed to nurture the young, impressionable souls in their midst. And so he stooped down humbly to address the concerns and questions that came to him through children's letters. Toward the end of his life, he wrote to a child, "If you continue to love Jesus,

nothing much can go wrong with you, and I hope you may always do so."<sup>7</sup>

Second, Lewis wrote in a letter to his childhood friend Arthur Greeves, with whom he shared more personal struggles and confidences, that he believed it was a duty to answer letters fully, especially when one is in the public eye and is shaping people's thoughts and ideas. What is amazing about this statement? He not only answered letters from reasonable, sincere people, but he also responded to those who seemed whiny, lonely, and miserable. In his biography of Lewis, *The Narnian*, Alan Jacobs cites a case in which Lewis wrote 138 letters to one irritable American woman.<sup>8</sup> Now that's commitment to principle! Lewis's sense of responsibility and fidelity to calling was solid, and he believed that as a disciple of Jesus Christ he needed to adhere to Peter's admonition, "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15 NIV).

Why did this American woman and others write so regularly to Lewis? I venture that, since he viewed this letter writing as part of his mission in life, his responses were so personal, helpful, and real that he made respondents feel as if he was their friend. The disarming presence that Lewis exuded when meeting people for the first time carried over into the way in which he engaged people on paper. He didn't come across as a stuffy, erudite elitist; rather, he was able to communicate with people on their level. He made great efforts to try to understand where people were coming from and then find a way to best get his point across through a story, illustration, or sentences that may not even be grammatically correct. His goal was to connect with the heart and mind of the other person for the glory of God.

Third, and perhaps of particular importance, Lewis believed that each individual human being deserved to be treated with love and respect because each was created in the image of God. In a sermon preached in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford, he states,

*All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or other of these destinations [heaven or hell]. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to*

*ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.<sup>9</sup>*

Perhaps as much or more than in any other area of his life, through his faithful letter writing, Lewis lived out his belief that we must do all within our God-given power to influence other immortals toward the kingdom of God. Clyde Kilby writes, "The main cause [of Lewis's faithful letter writing] was that Lewis believed taking time out to advise or encourage another Christian was both a humbling of one's talents before the Lord and also as much the work of the Holy Spirit as producing a book."<sup>10</sup>

Lewis's letters addressed personal concerns, theological issues, questions about his books, and all kinds of everyday-life issues. One example of his ability to combine the personal with practical spiritual advice can be seen in Sheldon Vanauken's book *A Severe Mercy*. Vanauken shares the powerful impact C.S. Lewis's writings, friendship, and letters had in leading him and his wife, Davy, to faith in Jesus Christ. Upon learning of Sheldon's conversion via letter, Lewis wrote warmly, "My prayers are answered." Then Lewis goes on to instruct the young believer, "There will be a counter attack on you, you know, so don't be alarmed when it comes. The enemy will not see you vanish into God's company without an effort to reclaim you. Be busy learning to pray."<sup>11</sup> This type of friendly kindness seasoned with clear instruction exemplified Lewis's letters.

He also brings his own personal likes and dislikes into the letters, much as any friend would do when speaking at the conversational level. In one letter to Mary, an American lady, he writes, "...everyone writes to me at Easter, so that what ought to be a bright spot in the year threatens to become for me a very dark one. Will you, please, always avoid 'holiday' periods in writing to me?"<sup>12</sup>

Noting some of the different sorts of correspondents, Lewis states, "An anonymous postcard tells me that I ought to be flogged at the cart's tail for professing to believe in the Virgin Birth . . . An unknown American writes to ask me whether Elijah's fiery chariot was really a Flying Saucer. I encounter Theosophists, British Israelites, Spiritualists, Pantheists."<sup>13</sup>

As Lewis dealt with such a variety of people and questions on a daily basis through the mail, he was able to develop his craft of writing letters to both en-

tain and engage recipients on important issues in a very down-to-earth style. This characteristic led to the book that launched his international fame, *The Screwtape Letters*. While sitting through a dull sermon one day, an idea struck him of writing a book that “would consist of letters from an elderly retired devil to a young devil who has just started work on his first ‘patient.’”<sup>14</sup> Lewis’s daily discipline of correspondence provided the framework on which to shape a piece of fiction that could capture people’s imagination and clarify the issue of spiritual warfare. These fictitious letters provided readers a window into their own thoughts that helped them better understand their personal struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. By reading the enemy’s playbook, the follower of Christ was better equipped to put on the armor of God and access the power of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives. A year after its publication in Great Britain, it was published in the United States and was immediately acclaimed in Christian circles. Soon the number of letters from America increased exponentially. These American fans would not only send him letters, but also care packages containing hams, canned goods, paper, and other luxuries in short supply both during and following World War II.

Over the years Lewis would write works of apologetics, poetry, fantasy, science fiction, and sermons. His last published book, a sequel to *The Screwtape Letters*, was a set of fictional letters written to a “friend” titled *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. This work, published posthumously, brought to a close the earthly letter-writing career of C.S. Lewis. Like his other letters, whether written to real people or fictional characters, they have continued to inspire and instruct people in their spiritual lives.

Recently, at the C.S. Lewis Institute, a young lawyer interviewing to be accepted into the Fellows program mentioned that her dad had been the most influential person, discipling her since she’d gone to college. I asked how her dad had fulfilled that role, especially once she’d left home. For the past ten years or so, from her first week of college up to the present day, he had faithfully written a weekly letter to her. He had kept her informed of life at home, given her fatherly words of advice, and had always told her how much he loved and cherished her as his daughter. Only recently had she started replying to his letters and perhaps stopped taking them for granted. She said that when her friends learn of her dad’s weekly letters, they seem envious of her relationship with her dad and his clear expression of love through letter writing.

In our modern world of text messages, tweets, and Facebook posts, perhaps Lewis has something to teach us about the importance of taking time to craft thoughtful letters to those whom God has placed in our lives. How would our work world change if we viewed each e-mail as coming from another immortal? How could our letters, e-mails, tweets, or texts point others toward the kingdom of light if we were more intentional about our use of the written word? Or imagine what could happen if even once a week, we were to sit down at our desks, take out pen and paper, and write one letter of encouragement to a friend or family member? Perhaps we still have something to learn from the one who signed most of his letters, “Yours, C.S. Lewis.”

## Notes:

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2. C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Vol.3 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 1954.
3. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Fontana, 1959), 117.
4. C.S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 101.
5. Brenton Dickieson, “A Statistical Look at C.S. Lewis’ Letter Writing,” *A Pilgrim in Narnia blog*, posted May 23, 2013, <http://apilgriminnarnia.com/2013/05/23/statistical-letter-writing/>.
6. Douglas H. Gresham, *Lenten Lands: My Childhood with Joy Davidman and C.S. Lewis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 44.
7. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 1474.
8. Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 225.
9. C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 15.
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11. Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977), 101–102.
12. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady*, 29.
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14. C.S. Lewis, “Letter to Warren Lewis,” in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Vol. 2, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 426.

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