

PROFILES IN FAITH

Helen Joy Davidman (Mrs. C.S. Lewis) 1915-1960

A Portrait

by Lyle W. Dorsett, Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism,
Beeson Divinity School, Samford University



After C.S. Lewis went public with his conversion and commitment to Jesus Christ, controversy hounded him until his death. Fashionable agnostics dubbed him “Heavy Lewis,” liberal Christians reviled him for his lack of theological sophistication, and fundamentalists attacked his interpretation of scripture and his ecumenical charity towards most Christian traditions. But neither these issues nor a host of other contentions stirred up anything like the furor that surrounded his marriage to Helen Joy Davidman. In the minds of many of C.S. Lewis’s friends it was bad enough that a bachelor nearly sixty years old married a woman of forty. But to make matters worse, she was an American divorcee who also happened to be Jewish and the mother of two boys.

The brilliant and attractive woman Mr. Lewis married in 1956 possessed a well-deserved literary reputation in her own right years before she met the celebrated Oxford don. Born in New York City to well-educated Jewish parents in 1915, Joy Davidman attended public schools and then went on to earn a B.A. at Hunter College and an M.A. from Columbia University. From childhood Joy exhibited marked intellectual prowess. She broke the scale on an IQ test in elementary school and as a youngster she loved books and typically read numerous volumes each week. Obviously a prodigy, Joy manifested unusual critical and analytical skills, as well as musical talent. Raised in a middle class Bronx neighborhood, Joy Davidman amazed even her brilliant and demanding father by being able to read a score of Chopin and then play it on the piano without another glance at the score. Similarly she would take her part in a Shakespeare play and memorize her lines after the first reading. Howard Davidman, Joy’s brother and her junior by four years, recalled that her striking intellectual powers and aggressive personality elicited his devoted admiration but at the same time inhibited him. To be sure, Howard was no intellectual slouch. Indeed, he excelled at the University of Virginia, became a medical doctor who practiced psychiatry in Manhattan after serving in World War II. Nevertheless, he confessed that he

was so intimidated by Joy’s writing that he never attempted to publish anything until his sister died.

Joy Davidman graduated from a demanding high school at age fourteen. She read books at home for the next year and matriculated at Hunter College at age fifteen. Clipping through Hunter as an English major and French Literature minor with honors at age nineteen, Joy then became a high school teacher upon graduation. While teaching her first year out of college, she earned a master’s degree from Columbia in only three semesters.

In college Joy Davidman exuded a passion for writing. She published some poetry as an undergraduate, and then in January 1936, *Poetry*, a prestigious magazine out of Chicago and edited by the venerable Harriet Monroe, bought several of her poems. Monroe published a few more of Joy’s works and then asked her to serve as a reader and editor for the magazine. Consequently Joy resigned her teaching position after one year, and devoted herself fulltime to writing and editing.

Her choice to write turned out to be a wise one. By age twenty-three her poetry caught the attention of Stephen Vincent Benet. He published a volume of her work, *Letters to a Comrade*, in the Younger Poet Series he edited for Yale University Press. This volume of forty-five poems was celebrated by Benet and it received excellent reviews. Thanks to her initial successes and connection with influential members of the eastern literary establishment, she became a client of Brandt and Brandt, one of New York’s finest literary agencies, and Macmillan brought her into their stable of writers. In 1940 *Anya*, her first novel, was published by Macmillan and well-received. She contributed to and edited *War Poem of the United Nations* which appeared with Dial in 1943, and then spent four summers at the MacDowell Colony for writers in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. There she wrote articles, poetry, and edited another volume of verse.

Always the radical with somewhat of an obsessive personality, Joy Davidman, like many intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s, proclaimed herself disillusioned

with capitalism and the “American system.” Joy flirted with Communism during these tumultuous years. And while she never came close to becoming a doctrinaire Marxist, she did advocate socialism over capitalism, especially since the later system, to her mind, had failed and caused the Great Depression. Joy actually joined the Communist Party but found the meetings and most of the members quite boring. If she never advocated or expected the overthrow of capitalism, she did indeed enjoy criticizing both Democrats and Republicans who she believed were less enlightened than the supposedly heroic socialists who led the USSR.

Ultimately Joy Davidman was too intelligent to buy into the romanticized notions of the USSR circulating among the American intelligentsia during the 1930s and early 1940s. Indeed, the only things Joy got out of her brief affair with Communism was part-time employment as a film critic and book reviewer and poetry editor for *New Masses*, a Communist newspaper, plus an acquaintance with another left-wing writer who would become her husband and the father of their two bright and healthy boys.

As early as 1942 twenty-seven year old Joy Davidman observed that the Communist Party in America had only one valid reason for being, “it is a great matchmaker.” In August that year, Joy married William Lindsay Gresham, novelist, journalist, Spanish Civil War veteran, charming story teller, and sometime guitar player and vocalist in Greenwich Village drinking establishments. Bill had grown disillusioned with Communists and their lofty speeches during his time in Spain. His dim view of the leftist movement hurried Joy out of the Party especially when she gave birth to David in early 1944, and Douglas less than a year and a half later.

By her own admission, Joy Davidman Gresham had been searching for fulfillment for years. College and graduate school, writing and editing, and socializing with some of New York’s most celebrated editors and authors, as well as political activism, were good in their place, but she was empty inside. With highest expectations she entered into family life with her husband. While Bill Gresham wrote and sold novels, including one (*Nightmare Alley*) that became a motion picture starring Tyrone Power, Joy stayed at home, did some freelance writing, and cared for her little boys, and the house and garden.

The Gresham marriage was in trouble from the outset. Bill had a serious drinking problem. Binges and hangovers cut into his writing—just when the growing family required more time and money. Bill not only wasted time and earned little money, he embarked upon a series of extra-marital affairs that at once broke

Joy’s heart and drove her to fits of anger and despair. To make matters worse, she had few friends and absolutely no religion to turn to for strength.

C.S. Lewis once remarked that “every story of conversion is a story of blessed defeat.” By the end of 1945 large cracks began to appear in her protective armor. Better educated and more intelligent than most people, well published and highly respected for a person only thirty years old, Joy had seldom if ever seriously entertained weakness or failure. But Bill’s long absences from home and apparent lack of concern for her and the boys left her devastated. One night in spring 1946 Bill called from Manhattan and announced he was having a nervous breakdown. Whether true or just another cover story for one of his escapades is beside the point. In brief, he was not coming home and could not promise when or if ever he would be back. Bill then rang off and Joy walked into the nursery where her babies slept. In her words, she was all alone with her fears and the quiet. She recalled later that “for the first time my pride was forced to admit that I was not, after all, ‘the master of my fate’ . . . All my defenses—all the walls of arrogance and cocksureness and self-love behind which I had hid from God—went down momentarily and God came in.” She went on to describe her perception of the mystical encounter this way:

It is infinite, unique; there are no words, there are no comparisons. . . . Those who have known God will understand me. . . . There was a Person with me in that room, directly present to my consciousness—a Person so real that all my precious life was by comparison a mere shadow play. And I myself was more alive than I had ever been; it was like waking from sleep. So intense a life cannot be endured long by flesh and blood; we must ordinarily take our life watered down, diluted as it were, by time and space and matter. My perception of God lasted perhaps half a minute.

Joy concluded that inasmuch as God apparently exists, then there is nothing more important than learning who He is and what He requires of us. Consequently the former atheist embarked upon a journey to know more of God. At the outset she explored Reformed Judaism but could find no inner peace. Always the reader, she devoured books and verse on spirituality, including Francis Thompson’s long poem “The Hound of Heaven.” It was first Thompson’s poetry and then three books by C.S. Lewis—*The Great Divorce*, *Miracles*, and *The Screwtape Letters*—that caused her to read the Bible. And when she got into the Gospels, according to her testimony, the One who had come to her appeared again: “He was Jesus.”

Joy Davidman found nourishing spiritual food in the Bible and the writings of C.S. Lewis. Because of her interest in Lewis, the publications of a liberal arts college professor and poet, Chad Walsh, who also happened to be a mid-life convert, caught her attention. Walsh wrote a biographical article on C.S. Lewis for the *New York Times* in 1948, and he published the first biography of Mr. Lewis a few months later entitled *C.S. Lewis: Apostle to the Skeptics*. Joy corresponded with Chad Walsh about her many questions related to Lewis's books and her new-found faith. Walsh understood and respected Joy's pilgrimage so he and his wife, Eva, frequently entertained Joy and her boys at their summer cottage at Lake Iroquois, Vermont.

The C.S. Lewis–Walsh connection provided just the right tonic for Joy's thirsty soul. At Chad's suggestion she read everything Lewis wrote as well as some books by Charles Williams, George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, and Dorothy Sayers. By 1948 Joy pursued instruction in a Presbyterian Church near her upstate New York home. Soon thereafter she and the boys were baptized. Between the New York pastor and her mentor, Chad Walsh, Joy grew in faith and began manifesting signs of genuine conversion and repentance.

At Chad Walsh's urging, Joy wrote to C.S. Lewis about some of her thoughts on his books. Although Walsh assured Joy that Lewis always answered his correspondence, it took her two years to find the courage to write. When she did, in January 1950, Lewis's brother noted in his journal that Jack had received a fascinating letter from a most interesting American woman, Mrs. Gresham.

For the next two and a half years Joy and C.S. Lewis carried on a rich correspondence that intellectually and spiritually encouraged each of them. Over that quarter decade Joy's health and family problems opened the way for the famous English author and his talented American pen friend to meet.

During the late 1940s Joy's health deteriorated. She suffered from nervous exhaustion while trying to raise the boys and write enough to pay all the bills. To be sure, Bill Gresham sobered up for brief periods, and he was in and out of the house depending on his moods.

Joy finished several writing projects, including a novel, *Weeping Bay*, that came out with Macmillan in early 1950. She gave a lengthy interview to a reporter for the *New York Post*, and he brought out a multi-part series of Joy's testimony dubbed "Girl Communist." Then while writing a book-length Jewish-Christian interpretation of the Ten Commandments, she became gravely ill with jaundice. Her doctor ordered rest—preferably away from the pressures of her chaotic house and family.

In the midst of this turmoil Joy received a cry for help from her first cousin, Renée Pierce. Renée had two little children, and an alcoholic husband, and a desperate need to live apart from her estranged spouse until a divorce could be finalized. With no money and few alternatives, she threw herself on the Greshams for mercy. Joy took her in and after a few months Renée enthusiastically agreed to oversee the household so Joy could get away for a rest.

With financial help from her parents, Joy sailed for England in August 1950. She found a room in London, rested well, and put the finishing touches on *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments*. While in London for four months the Lewis brothers invited Joy to Oxford. Indeed, there were several visits where Joy Gresham and Jack Lewis had opportunity to get better acquainted. Joy laid out her problems before Jack. He listened, grieved for her, and said a sad farewell when she returned to New York in January 1951.

During the four months Joy resided in London, Bill wrote from time to time keeping her informed about the boys. Just before her return, however, he announced that he and Renée were in love and having an affair. He wondered if Joy would consider living under the same roof despite the changed circumstances. Joy had no intention of doing that but she did return with some hope that the mess could be redeemed.

Months of wrangling failed to bring reconciliation. Nine months later Bill sued Joy for a divorce on grounds of her desertion when she went to England. In the meantime C.S. Lewis and his brother, Warren—both of whom had grown extremely fond of Joy—urged her to return to England and bring the boys. She was back in England with David and Douglas before Christmas.

Joy lived in London for nearly two years, trying to support herself by free-lance typing and writing in order to supplement Bill's erratic child-support checks. The boys were placed in private schools thanks to the generosity of C.S. Lewis. For almost two years Joy and Jack visited one another regularly. When Joy's financial situation worsened in August 1955, Lewis secured a place for her in Oxford, not far from his own home. He paid the rent and he and Warren plied her with manuscripts to edit and type.

By Christmas 1955 it was apparent to everyone who knew them that friendship had become love. Lewis visited Joy almost daily and she and the boys spent holidays and special occasions with Warren and Jack at their home, The Kilns. Because Joy was now a divorced woman, there was no impropriety—at least to their mind—for them to see one another on a regular basis. But Joy told her closest friends that although

they frequently walked and held hands, marriage was out of the question. Because she was divorced even their friendship appeared scandalous to some people.

In April 1956 the British Government, perhaps because of Joy Davidman's previous Communist Party affiliation, refused to renew her visa. C.S. Lewis was devastated. How could this woman be sent back to the United States where her boys would possibly be abused by their alcoholic father who had more than once done them physical harm? And how could he manage without Joy nearby? She, after all, was the first woman with whom he had been truly close. She was his equal if not superior in intellect, and they were the epitome of two people who truly were like iron sharpening iron,

In fact, C.S. Lewis could not imagine living apart from Joy Davidman. He threw caution and appearances to the wind. They quietly married in a civil ceremony on April 23, 1956. Now Joy could legally remain in England, with her boys, as long as she wished.

C.S. Lewis inquired about a sacramental marriage in the Anglican Church because to his mind a civil marriage was a legal convenience but not a real marriage. Lewis sought the blessing of the church on the grounds that Joy had legal grounds to be divorced and remarried due to Bill's infidelity, and further because he had been married prior to marrying Joy, and also neither of them were Christians when they were joined in a civil service years before. But the Bishop of Oxford refused. Joy was divorced. The Church did not condone divorce and he would not give his blessing.

Joy and Jack lived apart but they continued to see one another. So much so that some people were critical of their relationship despite the fact that they honored the guidance of the Church. But everything changed in early 1957. Joy was standing in her kitchen, her leg broke, and with excruciating pain she was able to drag herself to a place to call for help. She was rushed to the hospital where x-rays and tests revealed that her body was full of cancer. C.S. Lewis's doctor, who tended to her at the hospital, told me in the 1980s that she was dreadfully ill. There were malignant tumors in her breast and her bones were riddled with cancer. Dr. Humphrey Havard told Jack to prepare for her death. She could not live but a few days or weeks.

Professor Lewis called in a favor from a man he had helped after the war. Father Peter Bide, an Anglican priest with a parish just south of London, was purported to have the spiritual gift of healing. Lewis called him and asked if he would come up to Oxford, anoint Joy with oil, and pray for her. Father Bide arrived at Oxford at night. He and Jack talked about Joy's situation at some length, and Lewis told him of

Joy's dying wish to be married in the Church. Father Bide recalled that he did not feel he could in good conscience deny this poor soul her wish, even though she was not in his diocese. Therefore the next day, March 21, 1957, he anointed her with oil, prayed for healing, and then in the presence of Warren Lewis and one of the sisters at the hospital, he administered the sacraments of Holy Matrimony and Holy Communion. Within a few minutes an apparently dying Joy Davidman became Mrs. C.S. Lewis.

Christian marriage was only the first unexpected effect of Joy's illness. To the amazement of doctors and nurses, she made a rapid recovery after being sent home from the hospital to die. She went into a remission of nearly three years. She and Jack traveled to Ireland and Wales, and they made a memorable trip to Greece with their friends, June and Roger Lancelyn Green. The Lewises' closest friends, the Greens and George and Moira Sayers—all said that she showed no signs of poor health except some edema. Indeed, Joy and Jack were like two school-aged youth who were cutting up and having a wonderful time. That Joy had brought great happiness to Jack became evident by what he wrote to one friend: "it's funny having at 59 the sort of happiness most men have in their twenties. . . [ellipses his] 'Thou has kept the good wine till now.'"

The relationship of C.S. Lewis and Joy lasted only a decade. She first wrote to Jack in January 1950, and the cancer returned with a vengeance in spring 1960. Joy died in July and her ashes (she requested cremation) were scattered over a rose garden at the crematorium. Although it is impossible to quantify the impact of any loving relationship, there is massive evidence to show that these two pilgrims were unusually important to one another. On Jack's part, his early books had helped Joy come to faith in Christ. His letters and their personal relationship helped her mature spiritually in Christ, and he helped her to develop professionally as a writer. Lewis helped Joy sharpen *Smoke on the Mountain*. He also wrote a Foreword for the British edition, helped promote the book and intervened to secure her a good contract with a British publisher. On her part, Joy had an impact on C.S. Lewis that has seldom been recognized. Lewis admitted that when she and the boys came into his life it was extremely difficult for an aging bachelor to have an instant family in his house. But the result was that both he and Warren were forced outside of themselves and this was precisely what these self-centered bachelors needed. Beyond such intangible benefits, Joy helped Lewis with his writing. She wrote to one person that she increasingly felt called to give up her own writing so that she could assist Jack in his work. Lewis gave up writing

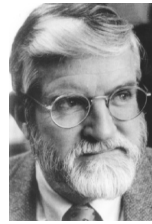
non-fiction and apologetical books after he published *Miracles* in 1947. Some people have argued it was because Elizabeth Anscombe so devastatingly attacked a part of the book. In any case Joy Davidman pushed him to take up non-fiction once more and as a result she helped him produce *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958) and she enthusiastically talked him out of a writer's block so he could finally go forward with his long-time coming *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*.

Lewis believed his best book was *Till We Have Faces*, and most students of his books agree. He unabashedly dedicated this classic to Joy Davidman and many saw her in the novel's character Orual. To the point, Lewis believed that Joy helped complete him as a person, and she acknowledged that he did the same for her. A careful reader will also find Joy's fingerprints on several of his other works, all the way from the double-meaning title of *Surprised by Joy* to some words and phrases in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. But the clearest evidence of her impact on his thinking and writing is in *The Four Loves* and *A Grief Observed*. Lewis might have written *The Four Loves* without Joy as his wife, but it would have been much less profound and certainly more theoretical than experiential. And finally, *A Grief Observed* could never have been written without the love and pain of Jack's life with Joy.

In the final analysis, then, those of us who thank God for the way C.S. Lewis has been our teacher through his books, must also be grateful for Joy David-

man Lewis. Without her the Lewis collection would be smaller and poorer.

Note: This article is based on Lyle W. Dorsett's biography of Joy Davidman: And God Came In (Macmillan, 1983) and a revision of that book titled A Love Observed: Joy Davidman's Life and Marriage to C.S. Lewis (Northwind, 1998), as well as the author's oral history interviews housed at the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. Dorsett's book on Joy Davidman is available in audio format as Surprised By Love: The Life of Joy Davidman: Her Life and Marriage to C.S. Lewis (Hovel Audio) www.hovelaudio.com.



The Rev. Dr. Lyle Dorsett holds the Billy Graham Chair of Evangelism at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. He is the author of numerous books, among them biographies of Joy Davidman (Mrs. C.S. Lewis), E. M. Bounds, Dwight L. Moody, and Billy Sunday. Keenly interested in the life and writings of C. S. Lewis, he has published a volume of Lewis's Letters to Children and

The Essential C. S. Lewis. His most recent book is Seeking the Secret Place: The Spiritual Formation of C.S. Lewis.

Dorsett is ordained in the Anglican Church and is with the Anglican Mission in America (AMIA) under the Province of Rwanda.

Lyle and his wife, Mary, have two children and four grandchildren. The Dorsetts founded and currently serve as directors of Christ for Children International, a mission to the economically and spiritually impoverished in Mexico.

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8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
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