



THE C.S. LEWIS STUDY PROGRAM

Letters to Malcolm — CHIEFLY ON PRAYER —

STUDY GUIDE

Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer, contains a series of twenty-two letters C.S. Lewis wrote to an imaginary friend and colleague.

Introduction

It is notable that early in C.S. Lewis's literary career, he composed a book of collected letters to a fictional correspondent (*The Screwtape Letters*), and that the final work he prepared for publication (*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*) was also such a work. As Lewis scholar Marjorie Lamp Mead observes in these lectures on *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis was hesitant to presume to write about prayer in the role of an authority or teacher. He had made several previous attempts to write a full-length book on prayer but without success. As with *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis found that the correspondence format enabled him to share his reflections in a dynamic and personal way.

Letters to Malcolm does not so much comprise an instruction manual on prayer as a brilliant course on prayer appreciation. Just as art or music enrichment classes take you deeper so that you can enjoy and unlock the genre's riches, so does *Letters to Malcolm* take you deeper into the mysteries of prayer. As a great poem helps you feel things about life or love that you might have overlooked or barely paid attention to, so *Letters to Malcolm* will engage you in reflections on the dynamics of prayer to which you may never have paid attention.

Lewis intentionally did not issue his reflections on prayer with the authority of a preacher or professional theologian but as a fellow traveler. As we read Lewis's *Letters to Malcolm*, we find that we too are invited into the conversation. Indeed, we discover in the conversation that prayer is more than something we do. It is a relationship into which we are invited. We learn that what we say to God and how we say it are of only secondary importance. Prayer involves an unveiling. In prayer we let God see our true self as we make our deepest longings known to God. Further, through prayer, we are invited to participate with God as privileged partners in his divine work in the world.

The six lectures by Marjorie Lamp Mead provide essential background information and the central themes on prayer that Lewis explores throughout all of the Letters. The enclosed study guide will take you step by step through each of the twenty-two letters. The questions highlight the underlying theme of each letter and challenge you to reflect and apply Lewis's insights to your own experience and practices of prayer.

LETTER 1

The Importance of Routine

Lewis begins the correspondence with his friend Malcolm by setting the focus on private, not public, prayers. However, in his first letter Lewis does share a few opinions about public worship.

1. Explain why Lewis doesn't care for novelty when it comes to worship services.
2. Describe how you respond to *traditional* worship services (e.g., singing hymns from hymnbooks, with organ accompaniment). Why?
3. Describe how you respond to *contemporary* worship services (e.g., singing praise songs projected overhead, with guitar/band accompaniment). Why?
4. How has the letter enriched your sense of the challenges of having worship services firmly rooted in Christian tradition yet open to being relevant to each generation?

LETTER 2

The Value of Written Prayers

Rose Macaulay (d. 1958) cited by Lewis in this letter was a highly published English author who enjoyed compiling written prayers for her own devotional life. When Christianity was becoming unfashionable among the intelligentsia, she openly identified herself as a Christian and used Christian themes in her own work.

1. How do you feel about using written prayers for your own devotional life?
2. Lewis writes that he can take or leave written prayers, because words are only “secondary” for him when he prays. What do you think he means?
3. While words were “secondary” for Lewis, he did think that written prayers had merit. What benefits does Lewis derive from using written prayers?
4. What benefits do you find when praying with your own words rather than with written prayers? What disadvantages might extemporaneous prayer create for you?
5. How do your feelings about the value of written prayers versus spontaneous prayers underscore your essential understanding of prayer?
6. Some Christian denominations are highly liturgical, and written prayers are central to their public and private worship. Other denominations have no written liturgy at all. Whatever your background, how might Lewis’s second letter to Malcolm influence the way you pray?

LETTER 3

Praying with the Saints and the Body

Lewis continues to stretch the way we think about prayer. He writes, “The consoling thing is that while Christendom is divided about the rationality, and even lawfulness, of praying to the saints, we are all agreed about praying with them.” In making this statement, Lewis is affirming that those in heaven continue to be part of the ongoing work of prayer that is an essential part of our life here on earth. Some authors refer to this sense of praying with the saints that have gone before as our entering into “the stream of prayer.”

1. John Calvin and the Reformers of the 16th Century who followed him frowned on the traditional practice of praying to the saints. How does Lewis justify his willingness to “pray with the saints”?
2. What do you think Lewis means when he says, “The body ought to pray as well as the soul.”?
3. When and where do you find it most fruitful to pray? What would have to change in your perspectives and patterns of life to expand the place of prayer in your daily schedule?

LETTER 4

What Should We Pray For?

Prayer is full of mysteries, and Lewis tackles one of the most difficult in this letter: “Why should we ask God for anything when the omniscient God already knows what we need?”

1. First, Lewis believes that we should pray because God *dignifies* us with the privilege of prayer. “By unveiling, by confessing our sins and by ‘making known’ our requests, we assume the high rank of persons before him. And he, descending, becomes a Person to us.” Explain this in your own words.
2. Second, Lewis thinks that *unveiling* is an essential idea for what happens when we pray. We must choose to *uncover* before God and reveal the concerns, questions, and even doubts or complaints that we have concealed deep within us. What is the point of “unveiling” if God already knows your heart?

- Included in Lewis's idea of *unveiling* is the idea of honesty. "We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us." What is the difference between praying the way we "ought" to pray, and praying for what we really want and expressing what we really feel?
- Lewis closes this letter with an admonition, "We must not be too high-minded." How is it that prayer both dignifies and humbles us at the same time?

LETTER 5

The Lord's Prayer

Lewis uses the Lord's Prayer as a guide to daily prayer and in this letter "festoons," that is, expands upon individual phrases. Here is a summary of Lewis's own "festoons" or elaborations upon different phrases in the Lord's Prayer:

PHRASE	LEWIS'S REFLECTION
Hallowed be Thy name	Not recorded
Thy kingdom come	We seek God's reign both <i>here</i> (earth) and <i>there</i> (heaven) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in nature and in human nature • in the best of human behavior • in the way those who are dead now live in heaven
Thy will be done	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seeking strength to submit to what must be done, even if it is disagreeable • be an agent of God's will • be open to God's ever new blessings
Our daily bread	all we need for the day, both physical and spiritual
Forgive us... As we forgive	help to forgive an offense, not just once, but every time we remember it
Lead us not into temptation	deliverance, not so much from "forbidden fruits," but from testings and "trying circumstances"
The kingdom, the power and the glory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the kingdom: God's good and rightful rule • the power: God's actual rule • the glory: God's radiant eternal beauty

- How do you respond to the idea of using the Lord's Prayer, not only as a public prayer spoken in congregational worship, but also as a guide for your own personal daily prayer?
- How might praying the Lord's Prayer as an occasional daily prayer guide change the way you pray?
- We have Lewis's personal expansions on the Lord's Prayer that he used to guide and enrich his prayer life. In what ways can you expand upon the phrases of the Lord's Prayer to enrich your own prayer life?

LETTER 6

Religion and Guilt in a Secular World

Lewis considers some of the challenges Christians face in a culture that was rapidly shedding its religious moorings. During Lewis's day, Alec Vidler, a noted English Anglican liberal theologian and historian of religion, was one of many who were making attempts to simplify Christianity to make it relevant to the less religious.

1. Why does Lewis object to the use of the word *religion* as if it were just another department of our schooling, like economics, physics, or psychology?
2. Lewis also objects to the use of the word *religious* because it can be misunderstood in a variety of ways. What then is his preferred way to think about religion?
3. Freud's famous approach to psychology was to suggest that the root of mental disease was guilt and then to reduce guilt to merely "guilt feelings." Based on Lewis's comments in this chapter, what do you think Lewis would say to Freud?
4. How might Lewis encourage you to pray if you told him that you struggled with deep feelings of guilt?

LETTER 7

Does Petitionary Prayer Make Sense?

Lewis raised the difficult issue of petitionary prayer in letter 4 and returns to it in this letter.

1. There are a variety of different expressions of prayer: thanksgiving, confession, silence, meditation, etc. How much of your prayer times consist of asking God to do things for you and those for whom you are concerned? How would your prayer times change if you were more intentional about including a variety of different types of prayer?
2. Determinism, a belief held by many scientists and philosophers, and biblical predestination both raise issues about free human choice. How is it that determinism excludes prayer as well as choice while God's determination of events incorporates both human choice and prayer?
3. Lewis writes of "unpredictables." Everyone knows that the sun is going to set every day, but we don't know what subtle shades and shadows we shall see. How does this perspective provide guidance and encouragement for petitionary prayer in a predetermined world?
4. How does the example of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane and on the cross provide clear guidance on this difficult question of asking God to make something happen or not happen?

LETTER 8

Prayer and Anxiety

There is a large gulf between a philosophical consideration of the "problem" of petitionary prayer and the particular reality of asking God to answer your prayer for the health of a loved one. One is hypothetical, the other, painfully real.

1. The tone of the correspondence is altered as Lewis gets word of a health challenge concerning Malcolm's son, George. At the outset of the letter, Lewis intentionally refrains from offering possible encouragements and assurances; why?
2. Lewis writes, "Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith. I don't agree." What comfort does this perspective provide in terms of our most pain-filled prayers?
3. What encouragement to prayer and comfort can we find in Lewis's description of Christ's final hours as he prayed in Gethsemane? As Lewis notes: "...the prayer in Gethsemane shows that the preceding anxiety [that Jesus experienced] is equally God's will and equally part of our human destiny." Does it help you to know that anxiety in and of itself is not sin?
4. What is your experience of the presence of God in the midst of your deepest pain?

LETTER 9

Prayer and Petition

After several paragraphs musing on how the apostles recorded the events and words of Scripture, Lewis gets to the point of this letter: how does prayer work? In his answers, Lewis takes us into very deep philosophical waters.

1. Lewis suggests that our prayers are heard before we make them; more than that, before we were even created! Such a position is necessary if everything in the world is an interconnected chain of cause and events. Prayer works, according to Lewis, because God exists outside of time—all time is present to him. Explain either why this idea helps you think about how prayer works or why it just brings confusion.
2. Does it bother you that the effectiveness of prayer is difficult to prove? Why?
3. Another challenge for prayer is the doctrine of God's *impassibility*. Impassibility, in theological discourse, means that God is not subject to whims or manipulative influence from anyone or anything. God does only what he knows to be right and that which serves his purposes. (Can you image the chaos if God listened to the conflicting and competing whims of his creatures as he governed the universe?) If God is impassible, then how is it possible that our prayers change anything at all? Read the following passages to see what light they shed on the issue: Exodus 32:9–14 and Jeremiah 18:1–10.
4. There are two theological camps concerning God's impassibility. *Augustinians* affirm impassibility and believe that God's will determined everything before the creation of the world. *Pelagians* deny impassibility and believe that God determined events after he listens to our prayers. According to Lewis, these problems are only problems because of our limited time-bound perspective. Lewis points to one passage in the Bible that affirms both: Philippians 2:8–9. What light do these verses shed on this challenging subject?

LETTER 10

Prayer and Personal Providence

Lewis continues the discussion of divine impassibility and prayer; how can God have his own purposes and plans, and yet somehow incorporate our prayers as well?

1. Lewis qualifies Pascal's magnificent dictum "God has instituted prayer so as to confer upon His creatures the dignity of being causes," because Lewis believes that it goes too far. In what way does Pascal's statement differ from Lewis's less explicit dictum that prayer is simply God "taking our words into account?"
2. Lewis wrote that even though we desire answers to our prayers of request, we can bear being refused more than we can endure being ignored. How does his perspective redefine the underlying motives for our prayers?
3. Alexander Pope, the great poet laureate of England, wrote: "the first Almighty Cause/Acts not by partial, but by general laws." Why doesn't Lewis like this maxim?
4. Some people object to prayer saying that "God has bigger things to do than consider my small concerns." After reading this letter, how would you respond to this objection?

LETTER 11

The Promise of Answered Prayer

How do we reconcile Jesus' promise that anything asked in his name will be granted with the biblical admonition that we should preface our prayers with "Thy will be done"? In this letter, Lewis shares some of his own struggles in trying to reconcile these two apparently contradictory models for prayer.

1. Do you agree that the promise of answered prayer is not a good place to begin instruction in the Christian faith for children? Explain.
2. While the promise of prayer appears to be conditional on the strength of our faith, Lewis does not think it wise to try to "work up our faith" by sheer willpower. Why is this? And what does Lewis understand "faith" in this sense to mean?

3. The other condition of answered prayer is to pray in Jesus' name. What does Lewis understand that to mean?
4. What is your own experience of "answered prayer"?

LETTER 12

Mostly about Mysticism

In this letter, Lewis considers mysticism and prayer.

1. Those who study mystical prayer say that mystics from different religions have a common experience. Why is Lewis skeptical of this claim?
2. Why is it that Lewis would not be troubled if drugs could duplicate the experiences of a Christian mystic?
3. Lewis writes in this letter that arrival at a specific destination is the only valid affirmation of our journey. Is Lewis implying that it is not the experience of prayer that matters but whether we end up in heaven in God's presence or in hell separated from God? Explain why you agree or disagree.
4. Lewis also muses that he finds it easier to pray for others than to pray for himself. What is your experience in this regard?

LETTER 13

God Praying through Us

Doesn't it sometimes seem that when we pray we are just talking to ourselves? This letter provides us with unusual insights, fresh guidance, and encouragement about our conversations with God.

1. Lewis has no problem thinking that prayer might be a grand soliloquy—a dramatic device used in drama to relate to the audience a character's thoughts and feelings. To begin to explore this idea consider: Although very similar, what is the difference between a monologue and soliloquy?
2. Lewis speculates that if at times our own prayer appears to be a soliloquy, it is not that we are speaking to ourselves, it is rather that God, by the Holy Spirit, is speaking to himself. What questions does this possibility raise for you? What encouragement can this provide?
3. What insight does Lewis offer about an individual's relationship to God when he writes that "our prayers are most ours when they are most his"?
4. What thoughts come to mind when you recall prayer times when you felt especially connected to God in prayer?

LETTER 14

Prayer and the Presence of God

Where is this God to whom we pray? This question, like many of the others that Lewis has addressed in this correspondence, has tied philosophers and theologians in knots for millennia.

1. Lewis addresses the issue of the presence of God in this world by reflecting on creation. Is God present in our world like an author is present in a book or an artist present within a painting? Or is there something more? What would you say?
2. Jesus teaches (Matthew 25:31–46) that kindness to the impoverished and disenfranchised is also a kindness to him. What clue does this provide for the presence of God in our world?
3. Lewis says that two opposing views of the presence of God must be resisted. Pantheism advocates that God is not only in everything and present everywhere, but, more than that, everything is a part of God. Deism, the opposite belief, conceives of God as cosmic watchmaker who constructs the world as an intricate mechanism and, once constructed, leaves it to function on its own. How can resisting both pantheism and Deism clarify and enrich our prayers?

4. One reason we struggle with the presence of God is because we avoid him, “You have been evading me for hours.” Consider (a) ways that you pursue God’s presence and (b) ways in which you sometimes seek to evade him.

LETTER 15

Prayer and Deeper Perceptions of God

Malcolm’s wife, Betty, suggests that the correspondence between Lewis and Malcolm is taking a simple subject, prayer, and making it unnecessarily difficult.

1. Having worked through the letters so far, explain why you are inclined to agree or disagree with Betty.
2. Appealing to the complexities of physics and psychology, Lewis defends their correspondence. What is his point?
3. What benefits for your prayer life can come from knowing that the world, God, and even yourself truly are the way we perceive them? Likewise, why is it important for you to acknowledge that as a finite being, your perceptions of yourself as well as your perception of God are necessarily incomplete?
4. Lewis understands the prohibition against idolatry to include mental as well as physical images. Having observed Lewis seek to smash his own mental images, what mental images of God do you need to break?

LETTER 16

Praying with Images

The conversation with Betty in the background continues, as does the topic of images and worship. Betty wants to know why Lewis “doesn’t use images as the rest of us do.”

1. Lewis is an Anglican, which, unlike some Christian traditions, finds value in the use of images as an aid to worship and prayer. Many Protestant traditions forbid all images as a violation of the Second Commandment. What do you think about the use of images, such as a sanctuary cross, as part of worship space and experience?
2. Even if it is not your background, consider: How might a limited use of images, physical and/or mental, be considered proper and useful?
3. Lewis writes that a well-designed church building as well as an image can be an aid to concentration and focus in worship. Would you agree with him? What else helps you focus and concentrate your prayers?
4. Lewis finds images, mental and physical, most helpful when they are “fugitive and fragmentary.” That is, when they are not the primary or exclusive aids by which he prays. What aids to focus your prayer do you use? And how do you keep them fresh?

LETTER 17

Prayer as Worship

The conversation between Lewis and Malcolm has shifted slightly, from probing the underlying mysteries of prayer as petition to prayer as worship. Lewis’s observations on life as worship, in turn, open up worship as a way of life.

1. Lewis credits Malcolm with teaching him about prayer as worship or adoration. What did Lewis learn about adoration from Malcolm as he splashed cool water from a brook?
2. Lewis writes, “It is possible to ‘read’ as well as to ‘have’ pleasure.” What are your favorite pleasures, and what do you “read” in, or understand through, them of the glory of God?

- Lewis writes several eloquent statements on worship in this letter:

“Pleasures are shafts of the glory as it strikes our sensibility.”

“I have tried... to make every pleasure into a channel of adoration.”

“Gratitude exclaims, very properly, ‘How good of God to give me this.’”

“Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”

Choose one or two of these statements and explain why they are especially helpful to you in considering worship as a way of life.

- Lewis mentioned several obstacles that short-circuit his experience of worship: inattention, taking pleasure for its own sake, wanting more or a repetition of the experience, and conceit. What obstacles hinder your own experiences of daily worship?

LETTER 18

Prayer and Penitence

Meaningful prayer requires that we face that in us which offends God—sin and God’s response to sin, divine wrath.

- Lewis does not care for Malcolm’s comments about the wrath of God. How do you think about the wrath of God toward sin?
- According to Lewis, why is conceiving of God’s wrath as merely the natural consequence of touching an electric wire not such a good idea?
- What do you make of Lewis’s suggestion that the expression of just anger and the resultant offering of forgiveness on both a human and divine level is healthy?
- The nineteenth-century Scottish pastor Alexander Whyte advocated as being good for spiritual growth a daily look at the slimy sins that crawl around inside our hearts. Lewis is not so sure that daily and excessive scrutiny is healthy (though he acknowledges the necessity of periodic self-examination), because he has experienced the danger of too much introspection in his own life. What do you think?

LETTER 19

Mystery, Magic, and the Eucharist

This letter returns to public prayer, a subject Lewis said at the outset of this correspondence that he preferred not to discuss. He takes up the subject to clarify comments others have made about his view of the sacraments.

- Lewis writes that the prayers to which he can most fully attend in church “are always those I have most often used in my bedroom.” In what ways does your private daily worship affect your Sunday public worship?
- How can Lewis’s comment about prayers used in his bedroom provide guidance for your own prayers, both public and private?
- The primary focus of this letter is reflection on Holy Communion or Eucharist, a subject of wide diversity among Christian denominations. Lewis was an Anglican and held a view of the Eucharist as a sacrament with Real Presence; in other words, Christ is uniquely present in the Eucharist, but exactly what this means is a mystery that cannot easily be articulated. Do you know what your denomination believes in this regard? How does your own particular view shape your participation in Holy Communion?
- Lewis acknowledges that his intellect cannot fully comprehend the reality of what happens when he takes the Eucharist, and he is content to leave it a “magical” mystery. How can accepting that Holy Communion remains a mystery far beyond our ability to articulate or understand be helpful for our experience of worship?

LETTER 20

Purgatory

Lewis touches on another area of great divide within the Christian church: purgatory. Most Protestants find the existence of purgatory inconceivable. Most Catholics and Orthodox can't conceive of the afterlife without the existence of purgatory.

1. Lewis succinctly summarizes the essential reason that Protestants reject purgatory. Can you restate in your own words the reasons for rejecting the belief in purgatory?
2. Lewis writes, "I believe in Purgatory." However, his own views of purgatory are nontraditional, based on his belief that even in heaven we will continue to grow in holiness. How do you feel about the idea that even in heaven we will continue to be purified, similar to what we term sanctification here on earth?
3. The idea of growth in heaven, for Lewis, makes prayers for the dead logical. How might it change the way you think about your departed loved ones to know that you could pray for them, and even that they could pray for you?
4. More than once in this correspondence with Malcolm, Lewis has made the point that he believes that our prayers are granted in eternity—that is, before the world was created and before we were even alive to pray them! What problems does this create, and/or solve, for you?

LETTER 21

The Challenges of Prayer

From the mind-stretching comments on time and eternity, Betty brings Lewis and Malcolm down to earth as she challenges them to address the practical problem of the "irksomeness" of prayer.

1. Lewis admits, "Prayer is irksome. An excuse to omit it is never unwelcome." How does this describe your experience?
2. If knowing and glorifying God is the reason we were made, why should the normal practice of prayer be so often experienced as a burden?
3. Frankly, as Lewis acknowledges, for most people, prayer is both a pleasure and a pain. How do you handle yourself when you find that you are avoiding your prayers?
4. Why is it that Lewis thinks that perhaps our best prayer times are the times that are the least pleasurable and the most difficult?

LETTER 22

Heaven

Lewis was famously at odds with liberal Christianity of the middle twentieth century. Liberals sought to eliminate the supernatural as being mere superstition or "myth." In contrast, central to Lewis's thought was an unwavering belief in the transcendent reality of the supernatural.

1. Although the stated intention of liberal Christians was to make believing in Christianity easier for the modern person, Lewis doubted that their efforts produced many converts. What is your perception?
2. Lewis's position on the supernatural and the centrality of heaven made Malcolm mildly uncomfortable. What role does heaven occupy in your Christian experience and thought?
3. Lewis raises the idea that our life here on earth is only a dim "memory" (or foretaste) of what will be fully realized in heaven. As he speculates, "The hills and valleys of Heaven will be to those you now experience not as a copy is to an original, nor as a substitute is to the genuine article, but as the flower to the root or the diamond to the coal." How does this way of thinking contribute to your perception of heaven?
4. "Guesses, of course, only guesses. If they are not true, something better will be." How might this phrase be an apt summary not only of Lewis's musing on heaven, but of the entire correspondence in *Letters to Malcolm*?

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