

C.S. Lewis on Meditating on God's Word

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C.S. Lewis's conversion story goes from atheism to theism and then, two years later, belief in Christ. His views on God, Christ, and the Bible changed as he grew. He initially, even after coming to Christ, had a suspicion about the inspiration of Scripture, but came to be a strong advocate of its authority. He came to believe that Scripture had the final word to say in controversial issues. For instance, when a woman came to him and said that some clergymen had encouraged her to deny the virgin birth, he urged her to not "collect the opinions of individual clergymen . . . but read Matthew and Luke I and II." On another occasion, he was writing a friend who cited Pascal as an authority on some theological matters. Lewis replied, "Yes, Pascal does contradict several passages in Scripture and must be wrong."

As he grew to maturity in Christ, he was convinced that reading the Bible was a primary source of spiritual growth. He maintained that all sixty-six books were important for spiritual health.

It was important for Lewis not just to study about the Scriptures, but actually to feed on them. His regular devotional routine consisted of reading from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, which meant that he read the whole Psalter about once a month. Then he would go to chapel at Magdalen College about 8:00 a.m. where he heard more Scripture read. Then later in the afternoon (preferably about 5:00 p.m.) he would read other parts of the Bible and pray.

George Sayer tells of a time when he and Lewis had spent the day walking in the mountains. Lewis asked to borrow a Bible because he had left his at home. Then he went

upstairs to the guest room for about an hour. Sayer could hear pacing around the room and praying through various portions of Scripture. Lewis had a phenomenal photographic memory and thus had virtually memorized large portions of Scripture.

When towards the end of his life Lewis was interviewed by Sherwood Wirt of *Decision* magazine, he was asked, “What is your view of the daily discipline of the Christian life – the need for taking time to be alone with God?” Lewis responded by citing Matthew 6:5-6 (to pray and read in private).

We have our New Testament regimental orders upon the subject. I would take it for granted that everyone who becomes a Christian would undertake this practice. It is enjoined upon us by our Lord; and since they are His commands, I believe in following them. It is always just possible that Jesus Christ meant what He said when He told us to seek the secret place and close the door.

Out of his regular reflection on Scripture Lewis came upon the great task that has influenced so many today. Not only did he write *Reflections on the Psalms* (reflections on various themes in the Psalter), but also took up the job of translating Biblical and theological truths into the vernacular. Books like *Mere Christianity* or *Screwtape Letters*, written for a popular audience, received criticism from various parties. Friend and fellow Inkling, J.R.R. Tolkien, felt that since Lewis was not a theologian or ordained minister, he had no business writing on such subjects for public consumption. Others were aghast

at his taking “fundamentalist” positions on Christ’s miracles (he believed in them) or on the reality of demons. One liberal theologian called Lewis’s writing “vulgar.” Lewis responded:

When I began, Christianity came before the great mass of my unbelieving, fellow-countrymen either in the highly emotional form offered by revivalists, or in the unintelligible language of highly cultured clergymen. Most men were reached by neither. My task was therefore simply that of translator – one turning Christian doctrine, or what he believed to be such, into the vernacular, into the language that unscholarly people would attend to and could understand. For this purpose a style more guarded, more nuanced, finelier shaded, more rich in fruitful ambiguities – in fact, a style more like Dr. Pittenger’s own would have been worse than useless.

Lewis added that if one hundred years ago theologians would have pursued this task of translation, there would be no place for him. Of course, this translation work meant that Lewis had to spend a great deal of time in reading the Bible and books about the Bible. He read widely in classic theological literature. For instance, when he wrote his book, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, he took 16 years to read every book written during that era found in Oxford’s Bodleian library. This was a very rich period of

Biblical and theological writing, so was like a seminary education in itself. While writing on such subjects, though, he wanted to avoid a primarily theoretical tone. In an article he wrote:

Christians themselves . . . have a bad habit of talking as if revelation existed to gratify curiosity ,” (whereas in truth) “revelation appears to me to be purely practical, to be addressed to the particular animal, the Fallen Man, for the relief of his urgent necessities – not to the spirit of inquiry in man for the gratification of his liberal curiosity.

This sincere, practical, clear exposition of Biblical themes resonated deeply with people who listened to BBC radio, or read his articles and books, speaking at Royal Air Force bases, or elsewhere.

Our times of devotion lead not only to a deeper understanding about important truths (a renewing of the mind) but also a deeper self-knowledge. We cannot apply the Scriptures to places we are not. Scripture needs to be applied to where we are. Lewis says:

I sometimes pray not for self-knowledge in general but for just so much self-knowledge at the moment as I can bear and use at the moment; the little daily dose . . . Have we any reason to suppose that total self-knowledge, if it were given

to us, would be for our good? Children and fools, we are told, should never look at half-done work; and we are not yet, I trust, even half done. You and I wouldn't, at all stages, think it wise to tell a pupil exactly what we thought of his quality. It is much more important that he should know what to do next . . . The unfinished picture would so like to jump off the easel and have a look at itself.

Lewis pursued this daily dose of self-knowledge, immersing himself in Scripture throughout the day. This self knowledge led to a recognition of his weaknesses and shortcomings, as well as a depth and intimacy with Christ that few people have attained. F.B. Meyer, pastor and Bible teacher, told D.L. Moody (the evangelist) that “the Spirit of Christ is present in all true Christians. He is prominent in some, and He is pre-eminent, alas, in only a few”. Meyer wanted to tell as many believers as possible that Christ desires to be pre-eminent in them. Although F.B. Meyer did not know C.S. Lewis, the Spirit of Christ certainly became pre-eminent in C.S. Lewis. It was particularly through his faithfulness to meditate on Scripture that he became a light to his generation and to ours.