

Grace in the Conversion of C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland, on November 29, 1898. He had an idyllic early childhood. He and his older brother Warren played together, invented games, and read many books that lined the hallways and the attic. When he was four years old, he pointed to himself and said, "He is Jacksie," and refused to answer to any other name. David Downing says that, "These carefree years held an almost mythic status in the mind of the adult Lewis." "Childhood" throughout his life is viewed as good and filled with joy. "Nurse" and "nursery" are associated with Lizzie Endicott (his nurse), as that which is simple, true, and good. His sense of joy described in his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* took on great significance in his life.

The death of Lewis's mother while he was still young (age 9) ended the settled happiness of his childhood. He describes his loss of security in the imagery that "the great continent had sunk like Atlantis." There were now only "islands" of joy in the midst of an unsettled "sea." Tragically, when Lewis's mother died, he in effect lost his father as well. Perhaps out of an inability to cope with the loss of his wife, Albert Lewis sent his two boys to a boarding school, whose headmaster, "Oldie," was later certified as insane. Lewis had gone to church some in his early life and continued in boarding school, but his sincere efforts soon ended. Lewis had gotten the idea that when you prayed you needed to mean what you said. When he said his evening prayers, he was always analyzing whether they were said rightly. Inevitably, they were not sincere enough, so he would start again and again and again. He would, he says, have gone crazy, had he not stopped.

This was the beginning of his "atheist" phase. Even though it is never wise to reduce people to psychological explanations, it is nevertheless accurate to say that psychological issues are contributing factors. Paul Vitz's book, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*, in which Vitz turns the tables on the normal psychological charge of religious belief as a "crutch" to meet emotional needs. Vitz argues that such a view is a double-edged sword that can also be used to explain atheists' unbelief. He studies such militant atheists as Voltaire, Hume, Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, Sartre, and others. He concludes that atheism of the strong or intense type is to a substantial degree caused by the psychological needs of its advocates, usually related to defective father figures. While you can take this kind of analysis only so far, it could be posited that at least one factor contributing to Lewis's emergent atheism might be the loss of his mother and his now absent and more volatile father.

Certainly there were many other factors drawing Lewis toward atheism. One was the lure of the occult. Lewis indicated that if the wrong person had come along he might have ended up a sorcerer or a lunatic. Another factor Lewis had to face was the problem of evil. He dwelt on the "Argument from Undesign" stated well by Lucretius. "Had God designed the world, it would not be a world so frail and faulty as we see." Similar to atheist Bertrand Russell, Lewis came to believe in the meaninglessness of life and that we need to build our lives on the basis of "unyielding despair." Lewis's way of stating it was, "Nearly all I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real, I

thought grim and meaningless.” In his imagination, he loved to read about truth, goodness, and beauty, but in his reason he held to a rather dark view of life. One of his prep school friends says Lewis was a “riotously amusing atheist.” However, this tension between reason and imagination, between the hemispheres of his brain, continued to increase.

Once, before embarking on a long train ride, Lewis purchased a copy of George MacDonald’s book *Phantastes*. He was surprised by what happened during his reading. Something came off the pages and “baptized his imagination.” Although he couldn’t put this quality into words at that time, he later came to describe it as holiness.

Another experience that finally cured his lure toward the occult was Lewis’s personal observation of the decline of Dr. John Askins, Mrs. Moore’s brother. (Mrs. Moore, mother to Lewis’s college roommate “Paddy,” lived with Lewis and his brother after Paddy was killed in World War I.) Askins had been wounded in World War I and never recovered physically or spiritually. He had become a psychoanalyst after the war and developed an obsession with spiritualism and contacting the dead. During one fourteen-day period, Lewis had to “hold him while he kicked and wallowed on the floor, screaming out that devils were tearing him and that he was at that moment falling into hell.” While atheist Lewis was aware that there could be physical causes for Askins’ problems, he could not separate the man’s state from his passionate pursuit of the occult. Lewis decided to stick to the “beaten path, the approved road.” Walter Hooper says, “It would be difficult to exaggerate the effect of this experience on Lewis.”

On the intellectual side of things, G.K. Chesterton had a significant influence on Lewis. As Lewis read *The Everlasting Man*, he appreciated Chesterton’s humor and was surprised by the power of his presentation. He began to feel that “Christianity was very sensible ‘apart from its Christianity.’” Lewis also found that he was drawn to many other authors that had this strange Christian twist—Spenser, Milton, Johnson, MacDonald, and others. In contrast, those with whom he theoretically agreed—Voltaire, Gibbon, Mill, Wells, and Shaw—seemed thin and “tinny.” On top of this, some of the brightest, most intelligent at Oxford were also “supernaturalists.”

During his atheist years Lewis simply assumed that miracles do not happen and that it would be naïve and unsophisticated to think they do. He was shocked to learn that Neville Coghill and J.R.R. Tolkien, some of the most intelligent and best-informed people he knew, were supernaturalists—that is, they believed that there is more to the universe than the natural world we see and experience. Even more stunning to Lewis was a fireside comment by one of the most hard-boiled atheists he knew: that the “historicity of the gospels was really surprisingly good.” The atheist referred to pagan mythology of a “dying god” who rose again, then mused, “It almost looks as if it really happened once.” The impact of this statement on Lewis was immense. If this militant unbeliever, the “toughest of the toughs,” was not safe, where could Lewis turn? Was there no escape? Lewis was forced to reexamine his antismiraculous assumptions.

Another factor contributing to his later conversion was the destruction of his “chronological snobbery.” This is defined as “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited.” His friend Owen Barfield argued with him that we must always ask: “Why did it go out of date?” “Was it ever refuted (by whom, where, and how conclusively)?” Our own age is a mere period that has its own characteristic illusions, which can be corrected by reading old books. In fact, Lewis later argued that, “it is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should read one old one to every three new ones.” The only cure to chronological snobbery was to keep the “clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds and this can be done only by reading old books.”

One by one arguments against the faith were answered until already having his imagination “baptised” and his reason satisfied, he felt the “steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.” Once while riding on a bus in Oxford, Lewis had the sense that he was “holding something at bay, or shutting something out.” He could either open the door or let it stay shut, but to open the door “meant the incalculable.” Finally he gave in, knelt and prayed one night, “the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.” At this time he only became a Theist and began considering who Christ was and sorting through other religious views.

His conversion to Christ was similarly unspectacular. He describes a trip in the sidecar of a motorcycle on the way to the Whipsnade Zoo. When he left for the zoo he did not believe that Christ was the Son of God; when he arrived at the zoo, he did believe that Christ was the Son of God, yet nothing extraordinary had happened along the way.

When Lewis finally came to Christ, he at last resolved the “dialectic of desire” he had been struggling with since childhood. Lewis’s first experience at Oxford was highly symbolic. When he exited the Oxford railway station for the first time, he was loaded down with luggage. Mistakenly, he started walking down the street in the wrong direction. As he kept walking, he grew disappointed at the rather plain houses and shops he found. Only when he reached the edge of town did he turn around to see the beautiful spires and towers that constitute Oxford. In telling this story, Lewis says, “This little adventure was an allegory of my whole life.” Boyhood was a “fall” from the joys of childhood. Growing up was even more of following the wrong way. The “path less taken” was a return to wonder and glory and a rejection of the mundane inanities of modern life. He needed to look back in order to go forward. Good only comes by “undoing evil;” a wrong sum can be put right.

His faith changed his direction from “self-scrutiny” to “self-forgetfulness.” He rejected the “unsmiling concentration on the self” and was “taken out of my self” to love God and others

Walter Hooper calls Lewis the “most thoroughly converted man I ever met.” His journey from atheist to “reluctant convert” to influential writer, perhaps the most highly regarded Christian writer of our time, was something beyond even his imagination.

Later, in C.S. Lewis’s last official interview with *Decision* magazine, Sherwin Wirt asked Lewis, “Do you feel that you make a decision at the time of your conversion?” Lewis replied, “I feel my decision was not so important. I was the object rather than the subject in this affair. I was decided upon. I was glad afterwards the way it came out, but at the moment what I heard was God saying, ‘put down your gun and we’ll talk.’” Wirt pressed Lewis further, “That sounds to me as if you came to a very definite point of decision.” Lewis commented, “Well I would say that the most deeply compelled action is also the freest action...I chose, yet it really did not seem possible to do the opposite.”

In one of Austin Farrer’s books *Lord, I Believe*, found at Wheaton’s Wade Center, Lewis underlined and marked his friend’s book echoing a similar thought as that given above, “The assistance of God does not remove the reality of our decisions; when we are most in God then we are most freely ourselves.”

This kind of emphasis that “I was decided upon” seems very different from his earlier emphasis on “free will” in *Problem of Pain* and *Mere Christianity*. It seems that the more mature Lewis came to see compatibility between God’s sovereignty and free will. Some of his earlier writings are unclear not only on this issue, but on the atonement, justification by faith alone and grace alone. He has sometimes been criticized for these things. But the story of Lewis’s conversion should be viewed in light of this final interview with its emphasis on the grace of God.

It should be pointed out that no conversion is the same. For instance, Billy Graham can point to the day and hour of his conversion while Ruth Graham can’t say within five years when it happened. Lewis’s “two-stage” conversion is certainly not typical, but his experience did shape his later writings. He believed that perhaps he could baptize others’ imagination (*Narnia* and the *Space Trilogy*) and help their reason to be satisfied (*Mere Christianity, et al*). Then by God’s grace they could be in a position to decide for Christ.

Recommended Books:

David Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert*
Art Lindsley, *C.S. Lewis’s Case for Christ*
Will Vaus, *Mere Theology*