

Reflections

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Why Not Begin With This?

In Letter 17 of his book *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, C.S. Lewis considers prayer as worship or adoration. An excerpt follows.

It's comical that you, of all people, should ask my views about prayer as worship or adoration. On this subject you yourself taught me nearly all I know. On a walk in the Forest of Dean. Can you have forgotten? You first taught me the great principle, "Begin where you are." I had thought one had to start by summoning up what we believe about the goodness and greatness of God, by thinking about creation and redemption and "all the blessings of this life". You turned to the brook and once more splashed your burning face and hands in the little waterfall and said: "Why not begin with this?" And it worked. Apparently you have never guessed how much. That cushiony moss, that coldness and sound and dancing light were no doubt very minor blessings compared with "the means of grace and the hope of glory." But then they were manifest. So far as they were concerned, sight had replaced faith. They were not the hope of glory, they were an exposition of the glory itself.



Yet you were not—or so it seemed to me—telling me that "Nature", or "the beauties of Nature", manifest the glory. No such abstraction as "Nature" comes into it. I was learning the far more secret doctrine that pleasures are shafts of the glory as it strikes our sensibility. As it impinges on our will or our understanding, we give it different names—goodness or truth or the like. But its flash upon our senses and mood is pleasure. But aren't there bad, unlawful pleasures? Certainly there are. But in calling them "bad pleasures" I take it we are using a kind of shorthand. We mean "pleasures snatched by unlawful acts." It is the stealing of the apple that is bad, not the sweetness. The sweetness is still a beam from the glory. That does not palliate the stealing. It makes it worse. There is sacrilege in the theft. We have abused a holy thing.

I have tried, since that moment, to make every pleasure into a channel of adoration. I don't mean simply by giving thanks for it. One must of course give thanks, but I mean something different. How shall I put it? We can't—or I can't—hear the song of a bird simply as a sound.

Its meaning or message ("That's a bird") comes with it inevitably—just as one can't see a familiar word in print as a merely visual pattern. The reading is as involuntary as the seeing. When the wind roars I don't just hear the roar; I "hear the wind." In the same way it is possible to "read" as well as to "have" a pleasure. Or not even "as well as." The distinction ought to become, and sometimes is, impossible; to receive it and to recognise its divine source are a single experience. This heavenly fruit is instantly redolent of the orchard where it grew. This sweet air whispers of the country from whence it blows. It is a message. We know we are being touched by a finger of that right hand at which there are pleasures for evermore. There need be no question of thanks or praise as a separate event, something done afterwards. To experience the tiny theophany is itself to adore.

Gratitude exclaims, very properly: "How good of God to give me this." Adoration says: "What must be the quality of that Being whose far-off and momentary coruscations are like this!" One's mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun.¹

What is your understanding of prayer as adoration? Is adoration a regular part of your prayer life?



*"By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host."*

PSALM 33:6 (ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, 1992), pp. 88-90 (some paragraphs combined).

