

Reflections

JANUARY 2021

The Point at which Time Touches Eternity



here are a number of occasions during the course of a year, such as birthdays and anniversaries, when we are reminded of the passage of time. At New Year's, we celebrate together the beginning of a new calendar year. One of the topics C.S. Lewis explored in *The Screwtape Letters* is how Christians should think about time, and the dangers of placing too much of our attention on either the Past or the Future. (In this book, Lewis is writing from the devil's perspective — showing us his temptation playbook.) In one letter, senior devil Screwtape writes to his nephew Wormwood:

The humans live in time but our Enemy destines them to eternity. He therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself, and to that point of time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered them. He would therefore have them continually concerned either with eternity (which means being concerned with Him) or with the Present — either meditating on their eternal union with, or separation from, Himself, or else obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure.

“The humans live in time but our Enemy destines them to eternity.”



Our business is to get them away from the eternal, and from the Present. With this in view, we sometimes tempt a human (say a widow or a scholar) to live in the Past. But this is of limited value, for they have some real knowledge of the past and it has a determinate nature and, to that extent, resembles eternity. It is far better to make them live in the Future. Biological necessity makes all their passions point in that direction already, so that thought about the Future inflames hope and fear. Also, it is unknown to them, so that in making them think about it we make them think of unrealities. In a word, the Future is, of all things, the thing *least like* eternity. It is the most completely temporal part of time — for the Past is frozen and no longer flows, and the Present is all lit up with eternal rays. Hence the encouragement we have given to all those schemes of thought such as Creative Evolution, Scientific Humanism, or Communism, which fix men's affections on the Future, on the very core of temporality. Hence nearly all vices are rooted in the future. Gratitude looks to the past and love to the present; fear, avarice, lust, and ambition look ahead...

To be sure, the Enemy wants men to think of the Future too — just so much as is necessary for now planning the acts of justice or charity which will probably be their duty tomorrow. The duty of planning the morrow's work is *today's* duty; though its material is borrowed from the future, the duty, like all duties, is in the Present. This is not straw splitting. He does not want men to give the Future their hearts, to place their treasure in it. We do... We want a whole race perpetually in pursuit of the rainbow's end, never honest, nor kind, nor happy *now*, but always using as mere fuel wherewith to heap the altar of the future every real gift which is offered them in the Present.¹

As you think about your own life, do you sometimes think too much about the Past or the Future, and not chiefly attend to the Present and eternity?



“...Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

MATTHEW 6:34 (ESV)

¹C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, pp.75-78.

