



# The Paideia Center

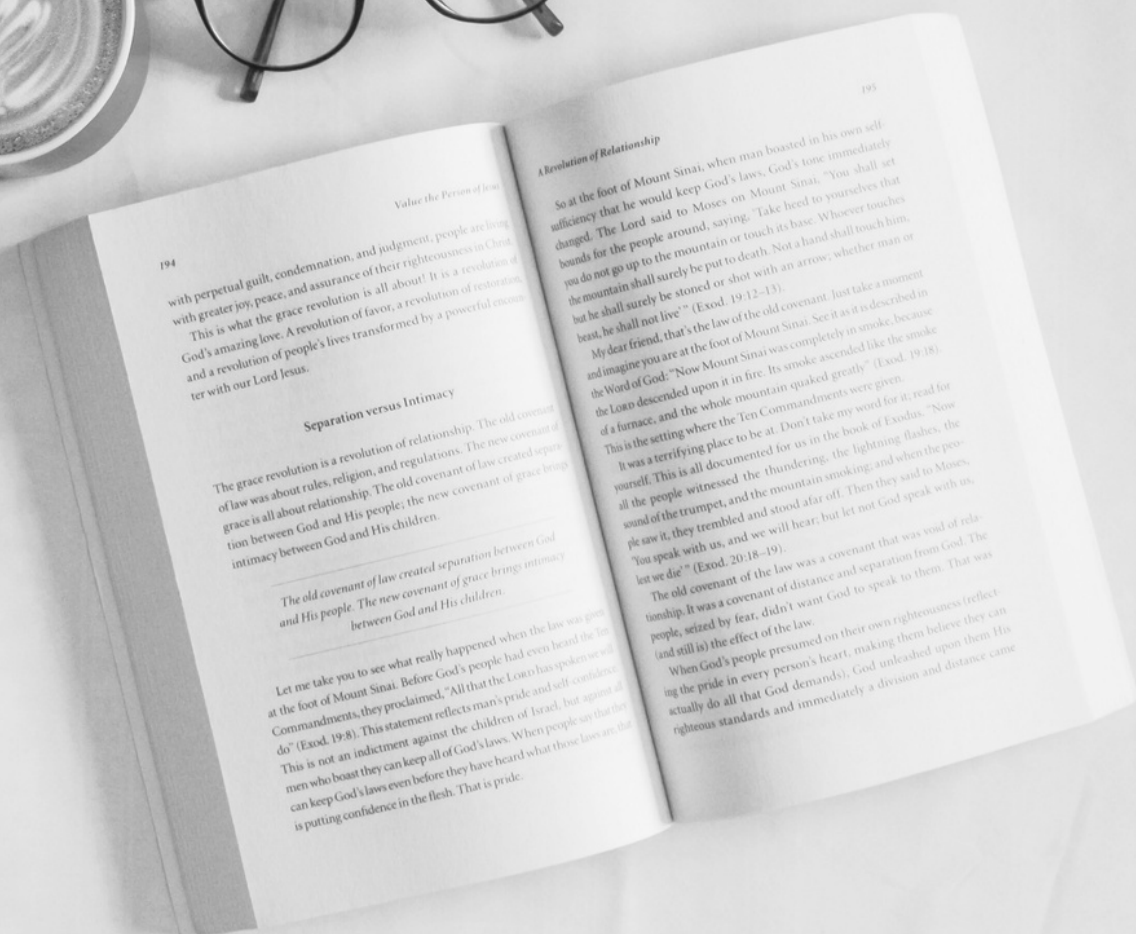
FOR WHOLE LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

## DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE



C. S. LEWIS

THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS



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*The Screwtape Letters*



## INTRODUCTION

As far as Christians go, C. S. Lewis has been one of the most recognizable over the course of the last century. The Oxford don's books continue to sell several million copies per year, to inspire shows and movies, and to reach a global and seemingly expanding audience. Best known now for his Chronicles of Narnia stories, Lewis also wrote in two other modes. He earned his keep as a tutor and fellow at Oxford (and eventually as a Professor at Cambridge), teaching literature from the medieval and renaissance periods. Not surprisingly, then, he published several volumes of literary criticism and history that are still read and engaged by scholars and students in that guild.

*Screwtape Letters* exemplifies his third genre of writing, namely, theology written for Christian laypersons. *Mere Christianity* may be his best-selling example of this genre, but *Screwtape Letters* registered his fame and significance to the wider world of letters. Its publication put him on the cover of TIME in 1947, with the title: "Don Versus Devil." The book emerged, however, from something else entirely. Lewis wrote 31 letters, each of which ran serially in a now defunct Anglican periodical called *The Guardian* from May to November 1941. They were appreciated greatly, though some letters register confusion on the part of at least a few readers who wondered why "the Enemy" was being described in divine terms and why the teacher sounded downright devilish at times. Satire is not always as obvious as we might think. Nonetheless, the public response was strong enough to merit publication as a book in 1942, and it became a bestseller.

When considering this Lewis, the devotional and theological writer, it is pertinent to remember that he's the same fellow who wrote in those other two modes. He spent his days studying and teaching medieval literature and its thought world. He even went so far as to identify himself as a "dinosaur," a specimen and not merely a scholar of that earlier world and its thought. That medieval mentality shaped his fiction, whether in the famous Narnia series or the less well-known Ransom trilogy. Michael Ward has traced the way in which the medieval understanding of the planets shaped each of the Narnian volumes to match the imagery of one of the planets (e.g. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* carries a Jupiter-like ethos), Jason Baxter has analyzed a host of imaginative dependencies from medieval literature, and Jerry Root and Mark Neal have explored the fundamental impact of his too frequently neglected works on literary criticism upon his own craft as a writer and thinker. He's also a writer of fiction, whether that's imagining the

world of Narnia and its history or charting ways to retell the primeval stories of Genesis in intergalactic guise in the Ransom Trilogy. He's imaginative and poetic, and he employs the concepts and images of antiquity and the medieval world in so doing.

His medieval mindset and his fictional imagination both shape his lay theology. It's perhaps less than surprising that he avoids writing a moral manual and instead offers such wisdom by way of a fictional set of letters from a senior devil to a junior devil. In so doing, he's aiming to baptize one's imagination to perceive one's context in a thicker and necessarily more fraught manner (with devils seeking to do battle against one). He's also aiming to address a host of contemporary topics (ranging from war to consumerism) with the wisdom of the medieval. It's not for nothing, then, that Boethius comes up explicitly in these letters or that teaching on the ordering of loves (the *ordo amoris* of Augustinian tradition) is a key element found therein.

The letters come from Screwtape, a senior tempter, to young Wormwood, a devil in training. There are 31 letters which cover a remarkable range of topics even as they also evince a coherent set of commitments. The following guide will help provide orienting comments to each letter before pointing to some leading questions that might help prompt and direct your reading group discussions.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

For study of the life of C. S. Lewis, see Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian*. You might also listen to the C. S. Lewis Podcast with Alister McGrath (which now has many episodes covering all sorts of terrain).

For contemporary analysis of research on Lewis, see Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

For more on Lewis (pertinent to *Screwtape Letters*), I recommend three other studies as useful background:

Jason Baxter, *The Medieval Mind of C. S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind* (IVP Academic, 2022).

Jerry Root and Mark Neal, *The Neglected C. S. Lewis: Exploring the Riches of His Most Overlooked Books* (Paraclete, 2020).

Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (Oxford University Press, 2008).



## 1ST MONTH

### *Letters 1-10*

We begin with letters 1 through 10:

**Letter 1** signals a major approach of temptation: “Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church. Don’t waste time trying to make him think that materialism is true! Make him think it is strong or stark or courageous—that it is the philosophy of the future. That’s the sort of thing he cares about” (19). It also speaks of the significance of routine and pattern: “you don’t realize how enslaved they are to the pressure of the ordinary” (20); and this observation: “thanks to processes which we set at work in them centuries ago, they find it all but impossible to believe in the unfamiliar while the familiar is before their eyes” (20-21).

**Letter 2** names the significance of circumstance used or exploited wisely: “Work hard, then, on the disappointment or anticlimax which is certainly coming to the patient during his first few weeks as a churchman” (23). Given that the patient has become a Christian, exploiting a coming disappointment seems crucial to Screwtape.

**Letter 3** offers insight on how to exploit familial relations in a diabolical manner and specifically offers a suggestion regarding distraction: “Keep his mind off the most elementary duties by directing it to the most advanced and spiritual ones” (25).

**Letter 4** points to how crucial it is to keep a patient from prayer. To that end, a devil can chide him or her with the formulaic and childish nature of their prayers. They may react by sheer willpower and aim at spontaneity (which brings perhaps a mood but surely no “Real concentration of will and intelligence”). Also, distracting Christians from their posture helps, because “they are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls” (29).

**Letter 5** challenges Wormwood’s celebration of a war commencing. Screwtape observes that wars are bad for demonic business. “How much better for us if all humans died in costly nursing homes amid doctors who lie, nurses who lie, friends who lie, as we have trained them, promising life to the dying, encouraging the belief that sickness excuses every indulgence, and even, if our workers knew their job, withholding all suggestion of a priest lest it should betray to the sick man his true condition! And how disastrous for us is the continual remembrance of death which war enforces. One of our best weapons, contented worldliness, is rendered useless” (32-33).

**Letter 6** addresses likely military conscription. “There is nothing like suspense and anxiety for barricading a human’s mind against the Enemy. He wants men to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them” (34). Anxiety and other dangerous mental states can be furthered by prompting the Christian to be self-conscious of their feeling of God more so than of God himself. More specifically, “in all activities of mind which favour our cause, encourage the patient to be un-selfconscious and to concentrate on the object, but in all activities favourable to the Enemy bend his mind back on itself” (35).

**Letter 7** reports a mandate for demons to conceal themselves. Instead of drawing attention to the tempter, it is ideal to divert attention to a cause (whether patriotism or pacifism). “Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which the religion becomes merely part of the ‘Cause,’ in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce in favour of the British war effort or of pacifism.” Why is this so effective? “Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing” (39).

**Letter 8** counsels awareness of the Enemy’s tactics (remember: that’s the tactics of God Almighty who is Screwtape and Wormwood’s Enemy). “He relies on the troughs even more than on the peaks; some of His special favourites have gone through longer and deeper troughs than anyone else” (41).

**Letter 9** states that trough periods provide unique opportunities for carnal or sensual temptations, for “powers of resistance” are weakest then (43). Using pleasure to tempt is a challenge. “I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours.” How then can temptation come in such a guise? “An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula” (44).

**Letter 10** addresses new friends and an opportunity therein for temptation. “The first thing is to delay as long as possible the moment at which he realizes this new pleasure as a temptation.” He goes on to state that recent Christian literature has not continued to warn against Mammon or Worldly Vanity and so forth, for such censoriousness has been written off as “puritanical” (47). Best of all when a Christian can be convinced that unwise behavior – whether bad influences as friends, or worldliness in other terms – is actually an expression of “Christian freedom” and better than a legalistic or prudish/priggish attitude.

A host of issues could be explored within or across these letters. Here are some leading questions:

- What does Lewis say of duty and obedience in these letters? See especially letters 4 and 8.
- How might we develop a theology of pleasure from these letters? And in what ways is pleasure used or bent to diabolical ends?
- Lewis names ways in which devils have led us to be suspicious of challenges to worldliness as if all such calls were “puritanical” or “priggish” or “prudish.” Is this still the same today or has that shifted in certain respects? (see 47-48).
- Several letters (such as 5, 7, and 10) reveals diabolical aims amid real tragedies (such as a Great War). How might we synthesize Lewis’s insights on the spiritual opportunity and spiritual challenge latent in suffering tragedy of various sorts?
- In what ways can we glean a doctrine of God from the witness of these devils? Is it possible to mirror-read these texts in a way that helps us understand God and God’s will accurately?
- What is revealed here about a true and valid sense of self and about varied ways in which it can be attacked or harmed? (see especially 56, 60)
- Does the sequence of the letters matter? Everywhere? Somewhere? Nowhere?

## 2ND MONTH

### *Letters 11-20*



Letters 11-20 continue Screwtape's guidance to Wormwood.

**Letter 11** picks up on the previous letter's discussion of friends and conversation, identifying what can and cannot be used to tempt. "Flippancy is the best of all" (51), though also the joke can itself draw persons into temptation by helping to "build up around a man the finest armour plating against the Enemy that I know" (51).

**Letter 12** calls Wormwood to keep the Christian from assessing accurately his spiritual state: "anything is better than that he should realise the break he has made with the first months of his Christian life" (52), so much so that he ought to practice the arts of distraction and the goal of numbness (53). Seemingly weak distractions can have great power if we "do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy" (54).

**Letter 13** reveals that Wormwood has failed in as much as his patient has had an experience of spiritual renewal. Screwtape reminds Wormwood of the Enemy's posture toward humans: "Remember, always, that He really likes the little vermin, and sets an absurd value on the distinctness of every one of them. When He talks of their losing their selves, He means only abandoning the clamour of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality, and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever" (56).

**Letter 14** addresses the way to attack a man or woman growing in virtue. "All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is specially true of humility" (58). Humility can be mangled, then, to great effect, by convincing the patient that it is a low opinion of oneself rather than actual self-forgetfulness (59).

**Letter 15** declares that "Our business is to get them away from the eternal and from the Present" (61). Temptation can sometimes summon them back to the Past, but often it is more powerful to lure them to think on the Future (62). Because the Future is least like Eternity, "nearly all vices are rooted in the Future" (62).

**Letter 16** identifies ways to tempt through religion: "if a man can't be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighborhood looking for the church that 'suits' him until he becomes a taster and connoisseur of churches" (64).

**Letter 17** identifies gluttony as a tool rightly understood by the tempter. "One of the great achievements of the last hundred years has been to deaden the human conscience on that

subject, so that by now you will hardly find a sermon preached or a conscience troubled about it in the whole length and breadth of Europe. This has largely been affected by concentrating all our efforts on gluttony of Delicacy, not gluttony of Excess” (67). Gluttony can be subtly used when it involves not gobs and heaps of something but a particular, specific, defined experience of something that can even be falsely interpreted by the Christian as being remarkably “temperate” (68).

**Letter 18** names the great triumph in conveying the idea that marriage ought to involve a perpetual state of being in love (what is called “our parody of an idea that came from the Enemy,” 70).

**Letter 19** analyzes the ways in which the Enemy’s (that is, God’s) love is nonsensical and incomprehensible (74).

**Letter 20** speaks of how the search for a desirable mate (for marriage) can be as diabolical as the urge for sexual impropriety. Demons can lead cultures to incentivize or glorify secondary traits (or, worse, negative traits) to distract from the search for a godly or mature mate.

A host of issues could be explored within or across these letters. Here are some leading questions:

- What are the chief temptations not *to* the religious life but *in* the religious life? From what biblical texts or teachings does Lewis seem to draw in this regard?
- Letter 12 speaks of the power of Nothing and of Distraction (52-54). Why are they so powerful as threats? In what ways? And do they provide useful lenses for seeing potential threats in technological realities today (i.e. smartphones)?
- Letter 18 speaks of the enemy’s idea as a “parody.” What is significant about that particular term and how it helps us understand those temptations? (see page 70).
- How does letter 19 especially (and perhaps others too) give us a definition of love?
- Lewis argues that gluttony takes more forms than might be imagined, as much in delicacy as in excess. Perhaps delicacy is a different sort of excess, excess not in terms of the object of desire but the controlling agency of the subject of that desire. Might there be more contemporary ways for us to talk about gluttony now (some 80 years later)?
- What are the main aims or ends of marriage? Which are the most ripe for temptations that might distort a marriage? And do they have potential (analogous?) significance for other relationships too or are they uniquely tied to marriage?



## 3RD MONTH

### *Letters 21-31*

Letters 21-31 conclude the series of letters from the seasoned Screwtape to his junior tempter, young Wormwood.

**Letter 21** reveals something of moral psychology: “here, as in everything else, the way must be prepared for your moral assault by darkening his intellect” (79). This does not suggest challenging his intellect, but darkening it and making it less important. Expectations shape experience here, so that humans aren’t tempted by mere circumstance but by circumstance interpreted in certain ways. A “sense of ownership in general” is remarkably common and exploitable (e.g. as if I own my time and intrusions aren’t just bothersome but an actual injustice). Screwtape reflects on a litany of terms to which the possessive pronoun “my” can be attached (80-81).

**Letter 22** reveals something of the Enemy against whom the demons battle. “He’s a hedonist at heart. All those fasts and vigils and stakes and crosses are only a façade. Or only like foam on the seashore. Out at sea, out in His sea, there is pleasure, and more pleasure.” If so, then how can tempters tempt? “Everything has to be twisted before it’s any use to us. We fight under cruel disadvantages. Nothing is naturally on our side” (83).

**Letter 23** wrestles with the fact that the patient, through a woman, has settled into a more Christian set of relationships (85). If religion can’t be removed, then it must be corrupted (85). “Certainly we do not want men to allow their Christianity to flow over into their political life, for the establishment of anything like a really just society would be a major disaster. On the other hand, we do want, and want very much, to make men treat Christianity as a means; preferably, of course, as a means to their own advancement, but, failing that, as a means to anything—even to social justice” (87).

**Letter 24** gives guidance on how to turn religion into a prideful pursuit by fostering a sense of an “Inner Ring.” In all this effort, “the great thing is to make Christianity a mystery religion in which he feels himself one of the initiates” (90).

**Letter 25** returns to distractions in the realm of religion. “What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of mind I call Christianity And ... If they must be Christians, let them at least be Christians with a difference” (91). It is especially captivating to nurse a desire for Christianity and the latest new thing, whatever that may be. The desire for the new and novel is insatiable by definition (92). “But the greatest triumph of all is to elevate this

horror of the Same Old Thing into a philosophy so that nonsense in the intellect may reinforce corruption in the will” (93).

**Letter 26** traces the way in which a demon can sow seeds of disharmony during courtship which will bloom much later in marriage. Selfishness needs to be fostered, and love or charity needs to be combatted. “Note, once again, the admirable work of our Philological Arm in substituting the negative unselfishness for the Enemy’s positive Charity” (94).

**Letter 27** warns of how the patient’s prayers regarding distraction are, nonetheless, a problem for the devils. “Anything, even a sin, which has the total effect of moving him close up to the Enemy makes against us in the long run” (97).

**Letter 28** speaks of the kind of comforts and contentment that has been fostered for modern humanity. “They, of course, do tend to regard death as the prime evil, and survival as the greatest good. But that is because we have taught them to do so” (101).

**Letter 29** clarifies that real wickedness requires some virtue (which will be bent or distorted): “To be greatly and effectively wicked a man needs some virtue” (103). He talks about how courage is a fundamental virtue to so many other things, and how cowardice is a dangerous area to lead a patient (104-105).

**Letter 30** addresses how moderate fatigue can be used to great effect by a demon (106-107).

**Letter 31** reveals Screwtape’s disdain for Wormwood when it is apparent that the patient has slipped through his fingers.

A host of issues could be explored within or across these letters. Here are some leading questions:

- What could we say by way of summarizing Lewis’s moral psychology? How are imaginations, thoughts, emotions, and volitions related? How does that moral psychology help clarify our spiritual threats and their tempting power?
- What’s meant by language of God being a “hedonist at heart” (83)?
- What are various letters throughout the book where Lewis models a privative view of evil (as in Augustine of Hippo and the tradition of thought influenced by him)? See, e.g., letter 18 or letter 29 (page 103).
- Letter 23 turns to address the “historical point of view” and skepticism toward the actual value of old books. Why is this relevant to demonic temptation or spiritual warfare?
- What else can be said pertaining to the use of religion as an arena for temptation? How does this compare to Jesus’s challenge to the religious in various gospel accounts? Does this land in the same way when read in more secularized and less religious pockets of the twenty-first century world?
- What are ways in which we might be prone today to treat Christianity as a means (87)? In what ways might we gradually shift in that direction by speaking of Christianity and *x*, *y*, or *z* (91)? How might this prepare us to avoid any blasphemous or idolatrous conflation of Christianity with a political or cultural program?