

# Regarding *Screwtape*

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## INTRODUCTION

I FIRST READ C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* in college and recently decided to reread it. I probably lacked the maturity to properly digest the book then, compared to more recently, with life experience in hand (or so I tell myself). I try to have one non-academic book in my rotation, so in the summer of 2024, I decided I would revisit ol' *Screwtape*. As I read it again, I was, for one, surprised that a book some eighty years old was still relevant for today and addressed issues that we continue to experience. Perhaps there is nothing really new under the sun. But second, I wondered about what an angelic counterpoint world might look like. Here we have an experienced devil, Screwtape, giving his lesser experienced nephew, Wormwood, advice on how to properly tempt people and lead them astray. Of course, this book is fiction, and there is no basis to think that devils have uncle-nephew relationships with each other; but Lewis created this "world" as a means of providing insight into the human condition and identify ways in which humanity can succumb, and often does succumb, to failure in life under God. So, *what would a conversation between angels look like as they navigate serving and ministering to humans?* I wondered. *Perhaps someone should write a counterpart to it.* Incidentally, soon after I had finished reading it, McMaster Divinity College (where I obtained my PhD and was a research fellow) had announced that it would host a gathering—not quite a conference but more than an informal meeting—called "Faith, Fantasy, and Philosophy: An Afternoon of C. S. Lewis," which was held on December 4, 2024. It ended up being more like a conference, as there were about eighty

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people gathered for the afternoon. However, I had made travel plans, where I would be arriving back in the Hamilton, Ontario, area on the morning of the conference, so I thought the timing would be too tight, and I would not submit a paper proposal. But it just seemed too coincidental to me that at the same time I read Lewis in a long while and subsequently had a related book idea in mind, that there was also a conference to which I could submit a paper presentation on this topic. This could be a helpful venue to test out my idea and get some helpful feedback. In addition, I was chatting with Dr. Stanley Porter, the organizer of the conference and casually mentioned my book idea. He thought a preliminary paper on that topic would be appropriate and interesting for the conference. Thus, I submitted a presentation entitled “Letters to Bradus” and proceeded to draft a few letters. So, on the morning of the conference, I arrived at the Buffalo–Niagara airport from an overnight flight from California (on which I slept very little), drove across the border fueled by coffee, picked up my dogs who had stayed with a good friend, unpacked and settled in, showered, and headed over to McMaster Divinity College for the conference, just in time for the ending of the first session.

The conference presentation included a brief explanation of my project, the reading of a few of the initial letters, and a subsequent discussion with attendees. The discussion proved to be thoughtful and helpful, with many insightful questions posed from the audience. I have since been thinking more about their comments and how to proceed. This chapter, which you are reading now, is a reflection on *Screwtape* in anticipation of *Letters to Bradus*, the tentative title of my forthcoming book.

## REFLECTING ON SCREWTAPE

Lewis was—to state the obvious—not only an insightful thinker, as evinced in his books like *Mere Christianity* and *The Abolition of Man*, but a brilliant creator.<sup>1</sup> He created whole worlds such as in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the Space Trilogy, and *The Great Divorce*, which both children and adults continue to refer to in both academic settings and casual conversations. This, in part, is due to his imaginative—one might even call it playful—mind, where the boundary between pretend and real often blurs in his fictional writings.

1. Since Lewis’s books have been published by a number of different publishers in various editions, I will feel free not to list any bibliographic information of these works.

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An apt example of Lewis's imagination is the first sentence of the preface to *Screwtape*, in which he writes, "I have no intention of explaining how the correspondence which I now offer to the public fell into my hands."<sup>2</sup> The correspondence, of course, is the collection of letters by Screwtape, a creation of Lewis, the actual writer of these letters by the fictional senior devil. Or perhaps, a devil named Screwtape actually does exist, and Lewis was fortunate to come across these letters somehow. The mere invocation of the mystery of the letters' origins is a playful invitation by Lewis to imagine that these are real letters from the demonic realm and to read them as such.

Lewis makes two other points in the preface. First, he states that two extremes ("errors") should be avoided, to either pay *no* attention to the existence of devils or to pay *too much* attention to them ("an excessive and unhealthy interest"). He calls the person on the one extreme a materialist and the other a magician—both delights to the devils. Materialists pay no attention to the devil and his influence in the world, as if a life of faith in Christ was simply about one's own personal relationship with him. Magicians, on the other hand, are so preoccupied with the devils that they may be spiritually paralyzed or pay less attention to Christ himself. Second, he states that the devil is a liar and that not everything Screwtape says is *true*, even from his own vantage point. The brilliance of Lewis is reflected throughout this book, as he uses satire to reveal how the devil works in people. Thus, it is crucial to seek a healthy, balanced, and sober understanding of the demonic realm and its influences for our Christian lives.

I offer some reflections on some major themes in *Screwtape*, in which Lewis, implicitly, explicitly, or ironically, highlights how people can recognize and guard against demonic influences and temptations in their lives.

### *Subtlety and Complacency*

In his correspondence with his nephew, Screwtape advises him that the easiest road to hell is a subtle or gradual slope. It is not the grand, audacious decisions that lead a person to hell, although sometimes this may be the case, but the incremental and seemingly innocuous compromises that lead a person away from God. Creating an immediate separation of 1,000 miles from a point is drastic, but incremental distances of a mile a day, after 1,000 days, can make one oblivious to the fact that they are now 1,000 miles removed from the point of origin. "Slow and steady wins the race,"

2. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, ix (Originally written in 1942, with the preface written in 1961).

it is often axiomatically said, and this applies to the realm of evil influence as well. There are several letters I wish to highlight in which subtlety and complacency are thematized.

Letter 9 builds on the previous Letter 8, which discusses how the law of undulation works in humans (see section further below). This law describes the normality of human life as consisting of ups and downs, what Screwtape calls “peaks” and “troughs”; it is a natural part of this earthly life. While Letter 8 is instructive for Wormwood on how this law works, and how God uses the troughs to draw his people closer to him, Screwtape in this next letter provides insight into how troughs can be properly exploited by the devils. He begins by stating that the trough provides an excellent opportunity to invoke sensual temptations, especially sexual ones, since there is less energy during the trough periods to resist. But he also states a more effective focus on exploiting the trough, to let the Patient think that this trough is permanent. If the Patient is a pessimist, he can further be tempted by convincing him to try to get out of the trough by sheer willpower. If the Patient is an optimist, he can be tempted by convincing him that the trough is not so bad and that “moderation” is the key to life. “If you can once get him to the point of thinking that ‘religion is all very well up to a point,’” Screwtape writes, “you can feel quite happy about his soul. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all—and more amusing.”<sup>3</sup> Moderation, or in another word, complacency, in the case of one’s faith and spiritual life, reflects a lukewarm approach to life, and Lewis depicts the devils being satisfied with that outcome for the humans during the trough.

In Letter 12, Screwtape praises Wormwood for his work and notes how pleased he is that the Patient is still a regular churchgoer. He writes, “As long as he retains externally the habits of a Christian he can still be made to think of himself as one who has adopted a few new friends and amusements but whose spiritual state is much the same as it was six weeks ago.”<sup>4</sup> As long as the Christian does the “Christian things,” Screwtape says, he does not tend to find himself concerned about the state of his spiritual life. As another instance of subtle complacency, Screwtape cautions his nephew from seeking out only “spectacular wickedness” from his Patient and to remember that accumulating small sins can be even more effective to bring the Patient far from God. He concludes the letter by stating, “Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot,

3. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 46.

4. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 58.

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without sudden turnings, without milestones, without sign posts.”<sup>5</sup> He does not state it outright, but the spectacular sins usually do not lead a person away from God so much as a gradual walking away, with perhaps a spectacular sin occurring when the person has gone too far away to realize that it is even sin.

In the next letter, Letter 13, Screwtape begins by chastising his nephew for allowing the Patient to repent and be renewed to experience a “second conversion,” which apparently occurs between Letters 12 and 13. The mistake that Wormwood made, according to Screwtape, was that the Patient experienced two “real positive Pleasures,” enjoying a good book and taking a solitary walk in the countryside with a cup of tea, which lifted him up from the lull that he was in. The implication here is that the simple pleasures of life can be used, for the Christian, to bring them out of spiritual dryness. It is subtle but effective, nonetheless. Screwtape writes, “The man who truly and disinterestedly enjoys any one thing in the world, for its own sake, and without caring two-pence what other people say about it, is by that very fact forearmed against some of our subtlest modes of attack.”<sup>6</sup> Enjoying the simple pleasures of life for their own sakes, rather than for other secondary motives, is a gift of God that can be used to draw closer to him. The application of this is that the Christian would do well to find a few simple things he or she finds pleasure in, for the sake of the things themselves, and regularly participate in them as a spiritual exercise. Lewis uses a quiet walk in the countryside with tea, or reading a good book, as examples. For others, it could be going to a concert or symphony, engaging in physical exercise, or enjoying a quiet cup of coffee in the yard while listening to the orchestra of the birds. The subtlety of life applies for both realms, both heaven and hell. In this letter, Lewis identifies a subtle joy that contributes to one’s spiritual health.

In Letter 25, Screwtape identifies what he calls “the horror of the Same Old Thing.”<sup>7</sup> In short, it is a fear of doing the same old thing and a pursuit of constant novelty. Just as God created seasons, he also created in humans a balance of both change and permanence, calling their union Rhythm. The imbalance, then, is to focus on the change and to constantly seek it out. And although Lewis does not explicitly comment on the converse, its counter-imbalance would be to focus on the permanence and fear of any

5. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 61.

6. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 66.

7. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 137.

sort of change (perhaps a form of neuroticism). But to exploit the horror of the Same Old Thing, Screwtape advises Wormwood to combine Christianity with something else: “‘Christianity And.’ You know—Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Psychical Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform.”<sup>8</sup> Regardless of whether or not one agrees with this particular list, the point is that it is not Christianity alone but joined with something else, with the something else always being replaced every so often like a filter or battery. This relates to the section below on distractions as well, but it relates to subtlety in the sense that there are subtle shifts to the main thing that distract a Christian from God. Instead of focusing on the main thing, the side thing becomes the main thing in the name of the main thing, so much so that the main thing remains no longer the main thing—and this is usually done unwittingly. And the horror of the Same Old Thing is the means by which this shift occurs. Screwtape states, “For the descriptive adjective ‘unchanged’ we have substituted the emotional adjective ‘stagnant.’”<sup>9</sup> The subtle word “and” tacked onto Christianity is subtle but effective to lead a Christian astray from the fundamentals of his faith.

The subtlety of temptation and the complacency of one’s faith—mirror opposites of contentment—are often the most powerful tools of the devil to lead a Christian away from God. Take, for example, the disqualified Christian leader who has stepped down from ministry—which unfortunately happens much too often—usually involving sexual, financial, or abusive misconduct. In most of these cases, it is not one spectacular sin that disqualifies the leader, but there is a pattern of years (sometimes decades) that eventually result in the public exposure of the sin. In some of these cases, one might say that the leader was a deliberate sociopath who preyed on people within his domain and took advantage of his authoritative position. But in other cases, the leader probably started with the subtle steps, or compromises, that led to greater and greater compromises, that led to carelessness and finally exposure. Screwtape as a cunning mentor urges his nephew to exploit this opportunity to draw Christians as far away from God as possible—slowly and subtly—because it works.

8. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 135.

9. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 139.

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### *Pride and Self-Deception*

Another topic that Screwtape emphasizes is pride, along with its partner, self-deception. Numerous teachings in Scripture warn against pride as one of the most prominent sins, namely because it results in self-reliance and independence from God. In turn, pride is the result of self-deception, the broader category, whereby one's pride is the result of one being deceived into thinking that one is independent and fully autonomous. I want to highlight four of Screwtape's letters in which Lewis refers to the themes of pride and self-deception.

In Letter 10, the Patient has made some new friends, described as a "middle-aged married couple . . . just the sort of people we want him to know—rich, smart, superficially intellectual, and brightly sceptical about everything in the world."<sup>10</sup> The joy of Screwtape stems from the fact that these friends represent the values that are opposed to the Patient's faith, but the Patient is either not aware of it or in denial of it. With the help of pride, among other qualities, Wormwood should be able to defer the Patient's acknowledgment that his new friends' opinions and ideologies are in direct opposition to his Christian faith. One of the ways in which Screwtape advises his nephew to accomplish this is by tempting the Patient to take pleasure in the inconsistencies of the two sides of his life, one that reflects his Christian faith and the other his worldly friends. He writes:

This is done by exploiting his vanity. He can be taught to enjoy kneeling beside the grocer [i.e., an ordinary man] on Sunday just because he remembers that the grocer could not possibly understand the urbane and mocking world which he inhabited on Saturday evening; and contrariwise, to enjoy the bawdy and blasphemy over the coffee with these admirable friends all the more because he is aware of a "deeper," "spiritual" world within him which they cannot understand.<sup>11</sup>

Lewis, I believe, is not critiquing having both Christian and non-Christian friends, both ordinary and extraordinary friends, in general. He seems to be identifying the Christian who seeks to please both worlds but in doing so is self-deceived; that is, his revelry in his new friends is for "a greater cause" in which these friends fulfill some sort of worldly pleasure.

10. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 49.

11. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 51.

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Referring to Letter 13 again, the situational context is that the Patient has experienced Pleasures—noble pleasures in and of themselves—which apparently have brought him out of the trough. Screwtape chastises Wormwood for letting this happen without any intervention. Towards the end of the letter, Screwtape advises, “You should always try to make the patient abandon the people or food or books he really likes in favour of the ‘best’ people, the ‘right’ food, the ‘important’ book.”<sup>12</sup> The quotation marks signify the best and right and important *according to popular consensus*—which may not be the best and right and important according to the individual. There is a subtle address of pride in this advice that the casual reader of the letter may miss. Pride is essentially an over-focus on oneself that may manifest itself as preoccupation with *appearances*—a preoccupation with oneself in relation to outward perception. Sometimes, pride is outwardly manifested due to insecurities about oneself—a compensation or an over-compensation, so to speak. So, the advice to tempt the Patient is to abandon security and surety in oneself, to abandon true confidence, by tempting the Patient to be attracted to the popular consensus. Now arrogance, a relative of pride but distinct in its orientation, is usually manifested by disdain for others, using it to elevate oneself. Thus, in this case, an arrogant Patient would favor what he really likes and let his whole world know this, and thereby overtly put down the popular consensus. But pride is more subtle than arrogance in its elevation of oneself by not requiring the disdain for others. One who is proud elevates himself in this case by identifying with the “best of the best” in every category, because he wants to be identified with the “best”; this may also arise from subconscious insecurities about himself in who he is. But in doing this, the Patient suppresses what he really enjoys and finds pleasure in it. And in this way, the Patient is being dishonest with himself, being self-deceived. The lesson: to be honest with oneself and find noble pleasures regardless of popular opinion. And when found, enjoy them without condemnation.

The next letter, Letter 14, changes course and depicts the humility of the Patient. Screwtape expresses his disappointment—questioning whether Wormwood is even doing his job—that the Patient is no longer making the overconfident commitments that he made early on in his new life. He is instead resolved to live day to day by the grace of God. This, Screwtape identifies, is *humility*, and it “is very bad.”<sup>13</sup> Wormwood fails to guide his Patient

12. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 66.

13. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 69.



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towards hell, and instead his Patient is back on track towards heaven. But Screwtape offers an immediate solution: to tempt the Patient to take *pride* in his *humility*. How ironic, yet pervasive, the potentially co-dependent relationship between pride and humility! The tactic that Screwtape advises his nephew to take is to go with humility but let it become a source of self-focus. He writes, "You must therefore conceal from the Patient the true end of Humility. Let him think of it not as self-forgetfulness but as a certain kind of opinion (namely, a low opinion) of his own talents and character."<sup>14</sup> Screwtape continues, "Fix in his mind the idea that humility consists in trying to believe those talents to be less valuable than he believes them to be . . . The great thing is to make him value an opinion for some quality other than truth, thus introducing an element of dishonesty and make-believe into the heart of what otherwise threatens to become a virtue."<sup>15</sup> If humility is best described as less of self and more of God and others (cf. Phil 2:3–4), Screwtape says essentially that even humility can be quickly whipped into its polar opposite, if done well. Screwtape writes, "But always and by all methods the Enemy's [i.e., God's] aim will be to get the patient's mind off such questions, and yours will be to fix it on them. Even of his sins, the Enemy [God] does not want him to think too much: once they are repented, the sooner the man turns his attention outward, the better the Enemy [i.e., God] is pleased."<sup>16</sup> Lewis identifies pride as an overfocus on oneself, and he sees that the devils work to exploit humility—probably better stated as *false* humility—in Christians to cross over to pride.

Letter 24 addresses one of the most insidious temptations for Christians: spiritual pride. In the previous letter (see the next section on distraction), Screwtape notes that the Patient has a new love in his life, a Christian girl who has become a "bad" influence on him (bad for the devils, good for Christians). But he notes in this letter that she has a "chink in her armour," which means that she views outsiders who do not share in her Christian faith as stupid and ridiculous. Screwtape states, "It is always the novice who exaggerates. The man who has risen in society is over-refined, the young scholar is pedantic. In this new circle your patient is a novice . . . Can you get him to imitate this *defect* in his mistress and to exaggerate it until what was venial in her becomes in him the strongest and most beautiful of the

14. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 70.

15. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 70.

16. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 72–73.

vices—Spiritual Pride?”<sup>17</sup> The angle of spiritual pride that Screwtape advocates for this Patient is tribalism—although this term is not used by Lewis. Tribalism is the phenomenon in which people strongly identify and show loyalty to a particular group, usually to the exclusion and detriment of outsiders. Tribalism and pride almost always go hand-in-hand. One feels like he *belongs* to a superior group, and thus he feels superior, and that is pride, subtly manifested. Screwtape writes, “The idea of belonging to an inner ring, of being in a secret, is a very sweet to him. Play on that nerve.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, belonging to a spiritually “elite” group often results in spiritual pride, often without the person being aware of it. In our current society, this happens with certain mega-churches and networks of churches, where the group in question becomes the fount of all truth and knowledge, and an air of superiority is palpable among its members, especially since God is “blessing” this organization through growth and expansion. Lewis’s focus was on Christians versus non-Christians, the particular tribe being Christianity, but I think in our North American society—and probably other Western societies that operate on Judeo-Christian principles—tribalism exists in a different, narrower domain among the varieties of Christianity that exist today. *Our way of doing Christianity is the best way, and others who are not a part of us are lesser Christians.* This is spiritual pride and is used by the Enemy (not Screwtape’s Enemy but the real Enemy) to distract Christians from the true and ultimate goal.

In these letters, Lewis identifies the subtlety of pride and self-deception as hindering one’s spiritual growth, and that even humility can be carefully used to activate pride in a person. The most insidious form of pride is spiritual pride, where the boundary between spiritual maturity and spiritual pride can easily be blurred: being proud about being humble.

### *Distraction*

Another cunning tactic of the devil is to distract Christians, usually with tangentially related things, things that may be noble in and of themselves but ultimately detract from closeness to God. Instead of maintaining focus on what a Christian should focus on, the devils resort to distracting them with not overtly incompatible pleasures but subtle pleasures that move a Patient away from God incrementally.

17. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 130.

18. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 132.

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Letter 6 addresses the potential for the Patient to go into military service; this is significant because of the situational context of *Screwtape* during World War II. Screwtape states how he would use this opportunity to distract the Patient: "We want him to be in the maximum uncertainty, so that his mind will be filled with contradictory pictures of the future, every one of which arouses hope or fear. There is nothing like suspense and anxiety for barricading a human's mind against the Enemy [i.e., God]."<sup>19</sup> Screwtape continues and states that God's will for humans is to focus on what they *do*; Screwtape's will is for humans to be preoccupied about what will happen to them. The proper response to such a situation, for a Christian, is to trust in God's sovereign will and live life in the present moment, day to day. Screwtape's tactic is to distract the Christian by trying to get him to be overly concerned about the immutable future. He also advises Wormwood to distract the Patient by making the focus of his prayers not on God directly but on his own attitudes and thoughts about God and then to divert his focus from the thing feared to the emotion of fear itself. Thus, the tactic is a continual distraction from the main focus, as Screwtape writes towards the end of this letter:

Think of your man as a series of concentric circles, his will being the innermost, his intellect coming next, and finally his fantasy. You can hardly hope, at once, to exclude from all the circles everything that smells of the Enemy: but you must keep on shoving all the virtues outward till they are finally located in the circle of fantasy, and all the desirable qualities inward into the Will."<sup>20</sup>

The "desirable" qualities, of course, are desirable according to Screwtape, but undesirable to God. Lewis identifies what Christians continue to struggle with, perhaps even unwittingly succumb to, being preoccupied with peripheral issues so that they cease to grow and mature in their faith and intimacy with God.

Screwtape begins the next letter, Letter 7, by addressing the question of whether it is beneficial for the devils to remain concealed or revealed but moves to another question of whether the Patient should be made to be an extreme patriot or extreme pacifist. (At this point, he states, this is concealed.) Screwtape states, "All extremes, except extreme devotion to the Enemy [i.e., God], are to be encouraged."<sup>21</sup> He nuances this by stating that

19. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 25.

20. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 28.

21. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 32.

some periods in history are characterized by lukewarmness and complacency, in which extremism is to be avoided and complacency encouraged. But in the present age of *Screwtape*—Lewis’s 1940s England—characterized by imbalance and factions, increasing extremism is “beneficial” (for the devils). But whichever extreme is adopted, patriotism or pacifism, Screwtape advises that it must be a part of the Patient’s religion and then regarded as the central part of his religion. Then as patriotism or pacifism becomes central, the Christian faith becomes important in so far as it helps either cause. The value of Christianity eventually lies in its strong arguments for that cause. Screwtape writes, “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.”<sup>22</sup> Lewis labels patriotism and pacifism as worldly, not in the sense of sinful but in the sense of *belonging to the world*. While they may be oppositional counterparts, with each view containing both valid and invalid arguments, even from a Christian worldview, these are distractions to a Christian’s primary calling to follow Christ. Screwtape continues, “Provided that meetings, pamphlets, policies, movements, causes, and crusades, matter more to him than prayers and sacraments and charity, he is ours—and the more ‘religious’ (on those terms) the more securely ours.”<sup>23</sup> Were this statement written today, it would include social media, blogs, podcasts, Instagram reels, and TikTok videos as replacements for . . . prayers, sacraments, and charity—the same foundational activities involved in devotion to God. The point that Lewis makes here is not that patriotism and pacifism are wrong in and of themselves, but that one can easily make them the focus, resulting in a neglect of true devotion to God. Any extreme, except extreme devotion to God, can serve as a distraction to the main thing.

Letter 15 begins by addressing the War again, but this time because humans are experiencing a lull. Screwtape asks: Should they promote this lull or keep him worried about the future? He answers his own question: “Tortured fear and stupid confidence are both desirable states of mind.”<sup>24</sup> (Did not Lewis have a trenchant way of putting things? Brilliant.) Which is the better, continued lull or projected worry? Screwtape describes what God wants: for humans to focus on eternity and the present, since the present is the point in time which touches eternity. Being concerned with

22. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 34.

23. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 34.

24. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 75.

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eternity means being concerned with him; being concerned with the present means being fully engaged and active, since the present is the only point in time in which humans can experience what eternity offers, freedom and actuality. The past and the future offer no such things. Thus, the task is to distract Christians from the present or eternity by tempting them to live in the past, to relish what has been. The good ol' days. But focusing on the past is not as strong a temptation, since there is a real knowledge of the past, and it has some semblance of eternity. So, it is a better temptation to have them focus on the future. The future is where both fear and hope reside. Screwtape further explains, "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."<sup>25</sup> So a tactic of the devil to tempt Christians is to distract them with either the past or the future, so that they may ignore the present life they are to be living and enjoying in God's will.

In Letter 23, Screwtape finds the Patient in a new relationship with a Christian girl who comes from a Christian family. He fears that this pervading influence in his life will make it impossible to *remove* spirituality from his life, so Screwtape suggests another tactic: *Corrupt* it. And the best way to corrupt the Patient's spirituality is to conflate it with politics. On the one hand, Screwtape warns, allowing Christianity to pervade areas of politics, such as social justice (a term, interestingly, that was used eight decades ago by Lewis), is a danger; but on the other hand, that could be used to make Christianity only a means of social justice, and not the end itself. Thus, while not denying his Christian faith, the Patient can be distracted by "good" things like social justice, or any other cause or goal that may be good in and of itself but has the potential to cause a Christian to forget about his faith. The bulk of the letter, however, is a discussion of the then-trending—and presently-lingering—historical Jesus studies. One might wonder if Screwtape himself becomes distracted in this letter by expounding on a tangential topic. What is the connection between his tactic to distract the Patient with a political focus and the historical Jesus? As Screwtape explains to Wormwood, historical Jesus studies have been and can be used to distract people from true devotion to the Jesus presented in the Gospels by focusing merely on ethics and social justice issues. A strong devotional life with God is replaced with something else that seems good.

Through these letters, Lewis focuses on the temptation to be distracted, sometimes by seemingly good and noble things. One is the future, or

25. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 76.

fear of the future, which may seem to be proper to think about, especially in the context of preparing for the future and being a responsible planner. Another is religion and politics, where one goal is conflated with the other, so much so that religion is displaced with politics, only to occupy a handmaiden's role to it. However, Lewis sees these potentially harmless occupations to be used by the devil to distract Christians from what they ought to be focused on, the truly important and central task of living for God in the present moment.

### *Suffering and Trials*

The final theme in *Screwtape* that I will focus on is suffering and trials. In *Screwtape*, Lewis addresses the theme of suffering and trials in the human experience from various perspectives, and he imagines how the devils use this to deter Christians away from God, to lead them closer to hell.

The situational context in Letter 5 is the inception of the Second World War. Screwtape is less than pleased that Wormwood is overjoyed at the Patient's fear and anxiety about the War. So, the Patient had a bad night's sleep. *Big deal*, states Screwtape in so many words. The real victory (for the devils) is to capture a person's soul, not simply enjoy their torture. He states, "So do not allow any temporary excitement to distract you from the real business of undermining faith and preventing the formation of virtues."<sup>26</sup> He does, however, admit to being entertained by watching humans express fear and anxiety: "The immediate fear and suffering of the humans is a legitimate and pleasing refreshment for our myriads of toiling workers [i.e., the demons]. But what permanent good does it do us unless we make use of it for bringing souls to Our Father Below?"<sup>27</sup> Wormwood must focus on the greater task of capturing the Patient's soul, not simply revel in the Patient's frivolous mood. However, in this letter, Screwtape does not offer any advice to Wormwood on exploiting this situation; instead, he complains that this kind of long-term suffering often strengthens Christians. He writes towards the end of the letter, "The Enemy's [i.e., God's] human partisans have all been plainly told by Him that suffering is an essential part of what He calls Redemption; so that a faith which is destroyed by a war or a pestilence cannot really have been worth the trouble of destroying."<sup>28</sup> In other words, if a

26. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 22.

27. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 22.

28. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 24.

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person leaves the Christian faith due to such sources of suffering like war or pestilence, it was not a strong enough faith for the devils to even bother with. It is within the Christian experience to expect suffering and trials. Thus, Lewis highlights the axiom that trials and suffering are an expected part of the Christian life and that Christians should not be surprised when experiencing this.

In Letter 8, Lewis introduces (and later popularizes) the law of undulation. Screwtape reminds his nephew that humans are half spirit and half animal, whereby the spirit side is directed towards spiritual things, and the animal side is subject to continual change, due to the changing nature of the flesh, passions, and imaginations. Thus, there is *undulation*, which orients the human back to the level from which they fall, “a series of troughs and peaks,”<sup>29</sup> lows and highs, valleys and mountains. But this law of undulation, Screwtape advises, should be used to do the opposite of what the Enemy (i.e., God) does with it, and he observes that God surprisingly uses the troughs more than the peaks to orient the human to himself. Screwtape states that both God and the devils have the same purpose—both wish to obtain the obedience of humans—but he identifies the crucial difference in how they achieve this. The method of devils is to devour and consume humans so that they would become one with them at the expense of their own human identities. Obedience for the devils is achieved by absorbing their wills into their own wills: total capture. The method of God for obedience, on the other hand, is to use to troughs, periods of lowness, even pain and suffering, to draw humans to himself: voluntary devotion. Screwtape explains: God does not devour, God does not consume, God does not force, but desires humans to freely come to him, not merely as servants but as sons and daughters. Lewis writes, “It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the sort of creature He wants it to be. Hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those which please Him best.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Screwtape warns that their cause is essentially lost when a person looks around the world, wonders why he has been forsaken (an allusion to Jesus’ very words on the cross), and yet continues to remain devoted to God. He also states that “some of His special favourites have gone through longer and deeper troughs than anyone else.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps Lewis is drawing on his own experience, but also certain

29. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 37.

30. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 40.

31. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 38.

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characters in the Bible who can be described as God's "favourites," those who are depicted as close to God but have experienced significant troughs in their lives (e.g., Abraham, Moses, David, Job, Ruth, Esther, the Prophets, Paul, and of course even Jesus bar Joseph himself). Screwtape ends the letter with a glimpse of how they can still exploit these periods of trough but points out several important points regarding pain and suffering: (1) pain and suffering—or periods of dryness—are a normal part of the human experience; (2) God often uses pain and suffering to draw his people closer to him, and the devil uses it to distract; and (3) God does not compel or force obedience, but gives opportunity for closer obedience through pain and suffering. Thus, the Christian would do well to accept periods of both highs and lows in his life and to capitalize on the periods of lowness by strengthening his faith in God.

Letter 21 approaches pain and suffering from an indirect angle. Screwtape writes, "Men are not angered by mere misfortune but by misfortune *conceived as injury*. And the sense of injury depends on the feeling that a legitimate claim has been denied. The more claims on life, therefore, that your patient can be induced to make, the more often he will feel injured and, as a result, ill-tempered."<sup>32</sup> The difference between misfortune and misfortune-conceived-as-injury is subtle but significant. Screwtape gives an example of a man who has reserved a period of time for himself, which is taken away by an unexpected visitor; or when he wants to spend time conversing with his friend to catch up on things, but his friend's wife shows up with him and dominates the conversation. Thus, Screwtape advises increasing these *claims on life* to maximize misfortune-conceived-as-injury. This can be done by confusing the use of possessive pronouns, such as "my": my time, my boots, my house, my car, my wife, my country, even my God, may all be used to refer to ownership, a claim. Screwtape writes, "The sense of ownership in general is always to be encouraged. The humans are always putting up claims to ownership which sound equally funny in Heaven and in Hell and we must keep them doing so."<sup>33</sup> Even the devils know that humans do not really own anything, although Screwtape is mistaken about the implication that both heaven and hell equally possess ownership of things. So, from this angle, pain and suffering are viewed in terms of perceived robbery (e.g., of time) or frustrations (e.g., of unmet expectations or thwarted plans). In this case, the pain and suffering stem

32. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 111 (emphasis mine).

33. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 113.



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from one's misconceived notions of ownership, with the implication that it is really God who owns all things—although Screwtape may never admit this directly. Left unchecked, as Screwtape encourages Wormwood to capitalize on this and increase the Patient's sense of ownership, pride and selfishness can grow and flourish.

Letter 26 explores another domain of suffering and trials, relational ones, as Screwtape addresses the situation of the Patient in the early stages of dating or courtship. He advises that this early period is prime for sowing seeds that in ten years will turn into domestic hatred. These seeds, he notes, involve several confusions. First is to confuse the meaning of "love" to the neglect of charity. He states that humans often in the name of love simply avoid or postpone a conflict that needs to be addressed. Second is to promote "unselfishness" in place of charity. The way in which unselfishness can be exploited is to sacrifice one's advantages, not for the sake of benefitting others, but so that one can simply claim unselfishness for oneself. Another way this can be accomplished is to exploit the different understandings of unselfishness by the sexes. Screwtape observes that men define unselfishness by not being trouble for others and women by taking on trouble for others. In exploiting this difference, men may see women as selfish and women may see men as selfish, for not doing what they each define as unselfish. In this vein, Lewis describes the passive-aggressive nature of humans in relationships, where instead of open and honest communication, there linger assumptions and expectations that should be clear to all. Screwtape writes:

If each side had been frankly contending for its own real wish, they would all have kept within the bounds of reasons and courtesy; but just because the contention is reversed and each side is fighting the other side's battle, all the bitterness which really flows from thwarted self-righteousness and obstinacy and the accumulated grudges of the last ten years is concealed from them by the nominal or official 'Unselfishness' of what they are doing or, at least, held to be excused by it.<sup>34</sup>

Lewis implies that honest communication of one's needs and desires, rather than a feigned pretense of unselfishness, paves the way for true love to flourish, in both romantic and platonic relationships.

Finally, the situational context of Letter 29 is the continuing War, where the Patient's town is expected to be bombed. Screwtape wonders

34. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 144.

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what the best way to exploit this situation might be: (1) cowardice; (2) courage which may lead to pride; or (3) hatred. He states that courage is useless, as the devils have no way of producing any such virtue. Courage, or any other virtue, must be supplied by God, but at least they can manipulate the virtue to their own malevolence. Hatred, on the other hand, can be used if wielded properly. Hatred is best when combined with fear. Fear alone, cowardice alone, is shameful for humans, but when compensated with hatred, a person is assuaged by the pain of cowardice. Screwtape writes, "The more he fears, the more he will hate. And Hatred is also a great anodyne for shame. To make a deep wound in his charity, you should therefore first defeat his courage."<sup>35</sup> To achieve this, Screwtape suggests keeping the Patient preoccupied with future possibilities and liabilities, so that he might avoid any potential trial or hardship in his life. And then, when after copious planning for the prevention of any trial the trial happens, the Patient may act upon his fear. He concludes, "For remember, the *act* of cowardice is all that matters; the emotion of fear is, in itself, no sin and, though we enjoy it, does us no good."<sup>36</sup> The emotion of fear is not to be avoided; it is the action that follows the fear that makes a difference. Furthermore, it is not the presence of trials and suffering in our lives that matter, for these are a part of human life on earth; it is the human response to these trials and suffering that bring about deeper spiritual maturity and closeness with God. The devils wish to increase fear and cowardice through trials; God wishes deeper dependence and courage that can be found in him.

## CONCLUSION

Lewis used the playfully imagined character of Screwtape, as well as a further removed Wormwood, to provide insights not only into how the devils may tempt humans, but also into the human condition itself. Some of the prominent, recurring themes in *Screwtape* which I have outlined include: (1) subtlety and complacency; (2) pride and self-deception; (3) distraction; and (4) suffering and trials. These are also some of the themes that will be explored in my *Letters to Bradus*, but from an angelic perspective. The temptations identified by Lewis eight decades ago are the same types of temptations that humans encounter today. This illustrates the fact that while the world is certainly developing in many ways, the human condition

35. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 160.

36. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 163.

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remains the same, and there is nothing really new under the sun in this regard.

Lewis warned us against two extremes in thinking about the demonic realm, either not to think about it at all or to think about it too much; either to dismiss the power of the devil in our lives or to obsess over its power. I hope this essay and my forthcoming book provide some help for us to find a healthy balance between either extreme and that the only extreme we succumb to is extreme devotion to Our Father Above.

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