

# C. S. Lewis on the God Who Is “Good and Terrible at the Same Time”

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The seven books of C. S. Lewis’s Narnia Chronicle sell six million copies annually, and Walden Media has spent 150 million dollars in filming *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* alone. Disney Pictures has spent many more millions in advertising the film to church and secular audiences alike. Those of us whose imaginations have been shaped—and whose lives have been reshaped—by the influence of C. S. Lewis should stand astonished in gratitude at this outpouring of this renewed interest in his work. As a student in the early 1960s at East Texas State University, where no official study of Christianity was available, Lewis provided me a serious and substantial theology—indeed, the only one at hand. Forty-five years and ever so happily after, I am still teaching Lewis’s work at Baylor. It’s mainly his literary works that have had the most lasting impact on my own thinking and living as a Christian: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, *Till We Have Faces*, and of course the Narnia Chronicle itself. For in these books and many others, Lewis offers a fresh and compelling vision of Reality as it is construed by what Lewis called “the baptized imagination.” And so we must rejoice and be glad at the issuing of these film versions of Lewis’s children’s books called the *Tales of Narnia*.

## I. Love as the Lord of Terrible Aspect

The heart of these books is to be found, I believe, early in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when Susan asks Mr. Beaver whether Aslan is a *safe* lion. “Course he isn’t safe,” replies Mr. Beaver. “But he’s good.” Peter also responds in the right way to this news that Aslan is not a nice pet who will coddle them with purring comfort, a sort of divine mascot who will assure them that all is well: “I’m longing to see [Aslan],” said Peter, “even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point.” *Frightened* is the right word. It’s the approach that Jews and Christians always take to the Holy One of Israel and Golgotha. No one can see God and live, so drastic is the divine goodness that it would obliterate our sinful condition if we came naked into God’s presence. “The fear of the Lord,” we are told over and again in Scripture, “is the beginning of wisdom.” “It is a fearful thing,” we read yet again in the Book of Hebrews, “to fall into the hands of the living God.”

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is no domesticated deity. The true God is always strange and dangerous. No one dare even call his name, lest in so doing we attempt to control and manipulate God, as we do all the other things that we can confine within our own categories. God thus names himself to the astonished Moses as he stands before the bush that burns without being consumed: “I am who I am: I will be who I will be.” This God and no other makes covenant with the Jews in order to do what he calls “a terrible thing” among us (Exodus 34:10). He strikes terror by entering the world on his terms rather than ours. He chooses obscure Israel and not mighty Babylon or Egypt to be his people. He comes not as a swaggering but as a lowly king. He rides not a prancing stallion but a plodding donkey. And, like Aslan, he occupies the most scandalous of thrones. For Aslan, the seat of power is the stone table of sacrifice, where he allows himself to be tied down and killed. For Jesus it is the cross of Calvary, where he allows himself to be crowned with thorns and exalted with mockery: “This is the King of the Jews,” the crowd taunts him. “He saved others; let him save himself.”

Because Aslan is at once a frightening and loving lion, the four children of Narnia are struck silent when they first behold him. Lewis gets this matter exactly right, for us no less than the Pevensie siblings: “People who have never been in Narnia,” the narrator declares, “sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time.” So it is for those who have never been in the church. The God whom we encounter

there is *good and terrible at the same time*. “It is only when one knows the unutterability of the name of God,” writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer from prison, that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ” (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 157). We are meant, therefore, to stand in wordless fright and wonder when we behold the crucified and risen Lord. Far from being alien to his goodness, Christ’s terror is its highest expression of his love. “God is the only comfort,” Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*; “He is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most hide from. He is our only possible ally, and we have made ourselves his enemies” (38). “Love,” declares Dante, “is a lord of terrible aspect.” His face is not soft and sweet but fierce and demanding. For the God of love will not let us remain in our misery. He has determined to give us nothing less than his own Son for our salvation. In turn, He will not accept anything less than total devotion, complete dedication, the utter conformity of our wills to his will. “Love so amazing, so divine,” sings Isaac Watts, “demands our souls, our lives, our all.”

Lewis liked to quote Jeremy Taylor, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican divine, on this deepest of Christian paradoxes: “God threatens terrible things,” said Taylor, “if we will not be happy.” To be happy is not, of course, to wear a blinding smile or a smug grin; it is not to be assured that everything will turn out well. To be happy is to take up the cross and follow Jesus all the way to the end. To find true bliss is to lose oneself in service to God and his world. The Gospel is devoted to nothing less than this drastic proposition: to our becoming truly and permanently happy—or else our remaining perpetually, indeed eternally, unhappy. As a Methodist friend of mind says, “The purpose of the Gospel is not to get us into heaven but to get heaven into us”—and thus, I would add, “to get the hell out”! Lewis emphasizes in *The Great Divorce*. We are all of us living, in an initial and preparatory way, in either heaven or hell. Our lives are being increasingly conformed or else disconformed to the will of God. The Kingdom is already in our midst, says Jesus. We are partaking partially of its glory here and now, or alas we are dwelling in an ever-increasing darkness. A great parting of the ways is already occurring among and within people. A huge gulf is already opening between those who seek selfishly to save their lives, only to lose them; and those who surprisingly find their lives by giving them away to Christ and his Kingdom. The whole human race is thus made up of those who are happy and those who are sad.

## II. Lucy the Happy

Lucy is the real heroine of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* because she has learned how to be happy. Not by accident is she the first child to enter the enchanted world of Narnia. Rather than being skeptical about its reality, Lucy believes. Though he has also been there, Edmund refuses to believe. He calls Lucy naïve, even stupid. “How can an enchanted world of fauns and unicorns,” he implicitly asks, “of centaurs and dryads and naiads, lie behind the doors of a wardrobe?” Or as we Southerners might say: at the back of a chiffarobe, a freestanding cabinet for hanging clothes, before the days of built-in closets? The difference between Edmund’s doubt and Lucy’s belief is explained in *Till We Have Faces*, the novel that Joy Davidman enabled Lewis wondrously to write from the viewpoint of a woman. So long as Orual stands with her neck arched in pride and contempt, she cannot see the mystical palace where her sister Psyche has been taken by Zephyr, the god of the west wind who had planned to devour Psyche but who, upon discovering her extraordinary beauty and holiness, marries her instead. Only when Orual is kneeling in humility can she behold Psyche’s palace. We who are arrogant like Edmund can see nothing but the obvious and the trite and the trivial. But those who are humble like Lucy can discern the world’s dark wonders and bright glories. Lucy can believe in the mystery of Narnia because she always looks to the good of her brothers and sisters rather than her own good. Other worlds, Lewis teaches us, are like other people: we enter into their mystery by the act of self-giving trust and charity. Lucy expects the best rather than the worst of others, and so she can credit a world as strange and odd as Narnia.

When Lucy meets the sobbing faun named Mr. Tumnus, for example, she has immediate sympathy for him. She comforts and encourages him, even though she knows not the source of his tears. Tumnus weeps because he has put himself in the employ of the White Witch, who has ordered him to kidnap children and bring them to her so that she might make slaves of them. Yet the poor faun is overwhelmed with grief at what he has

done. What if, upon learning of the faun's terrible error, Lucy had given him a stern, finger-pointing lecture against his wickedness? Surely Mr. Tumnus would have recoiled in angry self-justification, explaining how his wife had left him or his business had gone bankrupt or he had lost his job. What else could he do, he would have explained, than take up with this White Witch who has promised to protect and provide for him? So it is with us: we never commit a sin without first being able to justify it.

Yet Lucy refuses to drive Mr. Tumnus into the corner of self-justification. Because she has given herself over to life of unstinting goodness, she can also perceive the latent goodness in the sad faun. Rather than berating Mr. Tumnus for his sin, therefore, Lucy appeals to his charity. She asks him to lead her back to the lamppost and thus into the wardrobe and home again. It is thus evident that to be happy is to be turned outward to others and not inward upon ourselves. The Christian faith, Lewis teaches, is irreducibly public and visible and communal, not private and hidden and individual. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian. To have a personal relation with Jesus is to belong to his Person: his Body called the Church. There we learn the habits and practices of the Christian life, the virtues that Lucy has already begun to learn as a child: service and sacrifice, taking up our cross and following Christ all the way to the end.

### III. Edmund the Unhappy

If Lucy has learned to cultivate the habits of happiness, her brother Edmund has refused to embrace such a self-surrendering life. The first sign of Edmund's sinfulness is made manifest when he refuses to believe in the reality of Narnia. He cannot believe because he will not give. Edmund is a natively suspicious and spiteful little adult. He's always sneering and jeering at others, especially at his sister Lucy. Because he's a sour and selfish boy, Edmund becomes susceptible to the lures of the White Witch as Lucy does not. Note that Lewis reverses conventional color symbolism by making the witch white rather than black. The serpent is "the subtlest beast of the field." Evil is rarely if ever obvious. If it were, we could defeat it. Instead, evil is nearly always subtle and seductive. Almost all sin is committed in the name of some alleged good. Even Hitler and Stalin had their seemingly good "reasons." As Lewis teaches in *The Screwtape Letters*, the cunning of evil lies precisely in its ability to batten off the good. Sin is a parasite feeding off its host, like a tapeworm. Evil always twists and distorts good things. It turns them perversely in upon themselves like a screw—enclosing them like a clam within its shell—rather than opening them outward to thrive like a budding flower or a leafing tree.

A telltale moment in the movie will come when we discover whether it focuses on the battle scene at the end, to which Lewis devotes two scant paragraphs, or rather to the rich chapter entitled "Turkish Delight." The hordes of horrible creatures will no doubt make us shiver, even as Aslan slays them, but they will not teach us much about the nature of the evil that nearly ruins Edmund. Note well that the boy's will is not overwhelmed by sheer demonic force. Rather is Edmund undone by crafty satanic temptation. He is miserable because the White Witch has seduced him with Turkish Delight. So far as I can tell, Turkish Delight must be something as yummy as Blue Bell ice cream or Krispy Kreme donuts. What ogre would banish such goodies from our cabinets and freezers? Certainly not C. S. Lewis! "Never forget," laments the peevish Screwtape, "that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on [God's] ground. I know we have won many a soul [to damnation] through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. [God] made all the pleasures: all our [demonic] research so far has not enable us to produce [even] one" (44). Elsewhere Lewis calls God and outright hedonist, so determined is he that we be truly happy.

The problem lies, therefore, not with such pleasures as Turkish Delight; they are good precisely because they take us out of our suffocating self-interest into momentary joy and happiness. Good things become evil things only when we want to have them over again, and then another time, and yet again. The Witch offers Edmund more and more and more of the Turkish Delight, until finally he can think about nothing else. He's addicted. Such are the snares of temptation and sin. At first, our fantasies seem but an innocent self-indulgence. Yet gradually they grow into a massive obsession. Almost imperceptibly, they cease being physical and become

moral and spiritual. Edmund wants not only an endless supply of Turkish Delight, but also the power to become a Prince and eventually a King. For then he could get revenge on his brother Peter, though Edmund would justify such vengeance by promising to do good things with his new-won powers; for example, he would repair the bad roads in Narnia. Here, alas, is the enormity of Evil: first it deceives us, and then it makes us deceive ourselves.

The question Lewis raises is whether Edmund can be pulled back from the dead-end, one-way street he has begun to follow, the vicious circle he is now traversing; in short, whether Edmund can be rescued from his unhappiness. Note well that Lewis doesn't have Edmund suddenly saved, as if his own will were not to be involved. No: there is yet a sliver of light peeking through the crevices of Edmund's closed soul. What stops him from becoming a monstrous servant of the White Witch is his first sight of all the creatures whom she has turned to stone: the wolves and foxes and bears, the centaurs and dragons and lions, all of them frozen forever. Thinking the stone lion to be Aslan, Edmund at first mocks and flouts him: "How do you like being a stone? You thought yourself mighty fine, didn't you?" But then Edmund discerns that this lion is not Aslan but a sad and noble beast that the Witch has calcified. For the first time, Edmund feels "sorry for someone besides himself. It seemed so pitiful to think of those little stone figures sitting there all the silent days and all the dark nights, year after year, till the moss grew on them and at last even their faces crumbled away." Such is the outcome of evil, Lewis teaches. It freezes and congeals us. Rather than making us warm and lively, sin turns us cold and sterile. We would become lifeless hunks of mineral, Lewis suggests, if the world were not warmed with the Love that Charles Wesley hymns: "Love divine, all loves excelling, joy from heaven to earth come down." In Narnia, the embodiment of that transcendent love is Aslan.

#### IV. Aslan the Good *and* the Terrible

Nowhere is the craftiness of evil made so clear as in the Witch's insistence that she is an upholder of the moral law of the universe, and that since Edmund is a turncoat he is her property: "every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and ... for every treachery I have a right to kill.... [U]nless I have [Edmund's] blood as the Law says all Narnia will be overturned and perish in fire and water." We must confess that the Witch tells at least partial truth. If any of us got what we deserved, we would all perish: we would be sentenced to perpetual unhappiness, to death. "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin": this is a hard but true biblical teaching. Yet from it the Witch draws the utterly wrong conclusion: she thinks that the Lord of the universe is a deity gorged on blood, a Moloch eager for child-sacrifice, and thus that he strikes terror in his determination to make the unhappy even unhappier. When Aslan volunteers to die in Edmund's stead, therefore, she believes that this terrible God will be appeased and that Narnia will then belong to her.

Lewis the Christian knows that this is precisely the false view of the law that Paul sets himself against in the Book of Romans. God gave Israel the law, Paul explains, that she might delight and live in it. Alas, Israel refused to make the law an occasion of joy and fulfillment, turning it into cold and granitic lifelessness instead. This is what makes Aslan roar with wrath. Love is indeed a "lord of terrible aspect," precisely because he fiercely insists that we fulfill the moral law, that we become happy by living sacrificially rather than remaining sad by living selfishly. He becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ not to destroy the law, therefore, but to fulfill it. This all-loving God gets angry only if we determine to remain miserable in Edmund's kind of lawlessness. God's goodness is so radical that he takes our sins on himself, dying and then rising from death so that we might do the same: that we might be transformed into his likeness, that we might all be made kings like Peter and Edmund, queens like Susan and Lucy.

We come now to the Lion's Table, to receive the body and blood of the slain Lamb, so that we might not remain fixed and frozen in our misery, but be made truly happy. Here we receive the cup of total sacrifice, the bread that enables us gratefully to let our own lives be broken and be given back Christ for him to use as He pleases. In the name of the God who is both good and terrible at the same time, let us keep the Feast. Amen.