

BEN'S NOTES

**THE
SCREWTAPE
LETTERS**

BY C. S. LEWIS



**Ben
Shapiro's**
Book Club

C. S. LEWIS'S *THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS*

C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* is all at once a deep rumination on religion, a high comedy rooted in the hilarity of both humanity's flaws and Satan's foibles, a tragedy about the nature of death, and a tale of redemption and everlasting life. Lewis himself described *Screwtape* as difficult to write: "Though I had never written anything more easily, I never wrote with less enjoyment... [T]hough it was easy to twist one's mind into the diabolical attitude, it was not fun, or not for long. The strain produced a sort of spiritual cramp. The work into which I had to project myself while I spoke through Screwtape was all dust, grit, thirst, and itch."¹ And yet that world is wildly entertaining too – it turns out that *Screwtape* speaks to us, even as he's laughing at us. And that allows us to laugh at ourselves – and to learn about ourselves and how to fight our worst inclinations.

C. S. LEWIS: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

C. S. Lewis was born in 1898 in Northern Ireland; he grew up in a highly literate household and entered University College on a classics scholarship. He served in World War I in France and attempted writing poetry upon his return. But his first real success came with Christian apologetics, which he began to write in his late twenties. Until that point, he had been an ardent atheist; in fact, in *Surprised by Joy* (1955), Lewis describes his own early attempts at religion, blunted by "a vicious subjectivism which made 'realizations' the aim of prayer"² – something *Screwtape* talks about at length in *The Screwtape Letters*. It was the writing of G. K. Chesterton that made "an immediate conquest of me."³ And, as Lewis writes, he began to be convinced of God's existence and His dominion over the universe by all the forces surrounding him: "In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms."⁴

Lewis's first fiction successes came with his science fiction trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945), all laden with Christian symbolism.

He also wrote philosophical essays, including *The Problem of Pain* (1940) and *The Abolition of Man* (1943), and gave a four-part dissertation on the BBC during World War II, which became *Mere Christianity* (1952). *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), a mix of fiction and philosophy, sold massively in both the United States and Great Britain. It was not until 1950 that Lewis published *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, followed by six successful sequels in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He died in 1963.

SATAN WILL BE MOCKED

The Screwtape Letters is, first and foremost, a satire. Lewis opens the book with two epitaphs, one by Martin Luther (“The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn.”) and one by Sir Thomas More (“The devil ... the prowde spirite ... cannot endure to be mocked.”). Both focus on the fact that by laughing at foolishness, we disarm it. This is a profound point, and it speaks to the power in the secular culture’s total dominance: secularists easily mock the religious, but the religious find themselves ill at ease mocking anti-religious ideas and arguments. To do so, they fear, would paint them as unsophisticated. Those who believe most strongly joke most easily; those who vacillate in their beliefs are afraid of humor. As historian Gertrude Himmelfarb points out, religious Americans now “find it difficult to transmit their own principles and practices to their children.”⁵ Instead, they rely on non-judgmentalism to win the day. Laughter is judgmental. Lewis knows that and embraces it. After all, if the devil isn’t worthy of mockery, who is?

The Screwtape Letters is written from the perspective of one Screwtape to his nephew, Wormwood; Wormwood has apparently been given the task of convincing a young man away from his incipient Christianity, and Screwtape – a member of Hell’s middle management – is advising Wormwood on the best way to procure the young man’s soul. In taking up a pen on behalf of Screwtape, Lewis can parody and gut the arguments of those who oppose religious thought and life, pointing out their malevolent strategies and absurdities by putting arguments in the mouth of Screwtape.

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