

THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS

by C. S. LEWIS

Letter # 12

“The Danger of the Slippery Slope to Nothingness”

MY DEAR WORMWOOD,

(0) Obviously you are making excellent progress. My only fear is lest in attempting to hurry the patient you awaken him to a sense of his real position. For you and I, who see that position as it really is, must never forget how totally different it should appear to him. We know that we have introduced a change of direction in his course which is already carrying him out of his orbit around the Enemy; but he must be made to imagine that all the choices which have effected this change of course are trivial and revocable. He must not be allowed to suspect that he is now, however slowly, heading right away from the sun on a line which will carry him into the cold and dark of utmost space.

(1) For this reason I am almost glad to hear that he is still a churchgoer and a communicant. I know there are dangers in this; but anything is better than that he should realize the break it has made with the first months of his Christian life. 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. And while he thinks that, we do not have to contend with the explicit repentance of a definite, fully recognized, sin, but only with his vague, though uneasy, feeling that he hasn't been doing very well lately.

(2) This dim uneasiness needs careful handling. If it gets too strong it may wake him up and spoil the whole game. On the other hand, if you suppress it entirely—which, by the by, the Enemy will probably not allow you to do—we lose an element in the situation which can be turned to good account. If such a feeling is allowed to live, but not allowed to become irresistible and flower into real repentance, it has one invaluable tendency. It increases the patient's reluctance to think about the Enemy. All humans at nearly all times have some such reluctance; but when thinking of Him involves facing and intensifying a whole vague cloud of half-conscious guilt, this reluctance is increased tenfold. They hate every idea that suggests Him, just as men in financial embarrassment hate the very sight of a passbook. In this state your patient will not omit, but he will increasingly dislike, his religious duties. He will think about them as little as he feels he decently can beforehand, and forget them as soon as possible when they are over. A few weeks ago you had to *tempt* him to unreality and inattention in his prayers: but now you will find him opening his arms to you and almost begging you to distract his purpose and benumb his heart. He will *want* his prayers to be unreal, for he will dread nothing so much as effective contact with the Enemy. His aim will be to let sleeping worms lie.

(3) As this condition becomes more fully established, you will be gradually freed from the tiresome business of providing Pleasures as temptations. As the uneasiness and his reluctance to face it cut him off more and more from all real happiness, and as habit renders the pleasures of vanity and excitement and flippancy at once less pleasant and harder to forgo (for that is what habit fortunately does to a pleasure) you will find that anything or nothing is sufficient to attract his wandering attention. You no longer need a good book, which he really likes, to keep him from his prayers or his work or his sleep; a column of advertisements in yesterday's paper will do. You can make him waste his time not only in conversation he enjoys with people whom he likes, but in conversations with those he cares nothing about on subjects that bore him. You can make him do nothing at all for long periods. You can keep him up late at night, not roistering, but staring at a dead fire in a cold room. All the healthy and outgoing activities which we want him to avoid can be inhibited and *nothing* given in return, so that at last he may say, as one of my own patients said on his arrival down here, "I now see that I spent most of my life in doing *neither* what I ought *nor* what I liked". The Christians describe the Enemy as one "without whom Nothing is strong". And Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them, in

drumming of fingers and kicking of heels, in whistling tunes that he does not like, or in the long, dim labyrinth of reveries that have not even lust or ambition to give them a relish, but which, once chance association has started them, the creature is too weak and fuddled to shake off.

(4) You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts,

Your affectionate uncle
SCREWTAPE

Analysis Questions

1. In Paragraph 0, why does Screwtape caution Wormwood not to hurry the patient too quickly in the various temptations that they are thrusting against him? How does the fact that the patient is unable to “truly see” his real position work against him? What can we do to help prevent this in our own lives (Heb 13:17; Prov 27:6, 17; Heb 10:24; Gal 6:1-2; 1 Thess 5:11)?
2. In Paragraph 0, how does our own pride and lack of accountability get in the way of us not recognizing the seriousness of any sort of backsliding? How does this backsliding usually happen and why do we think the causes of these are trivial or revocable? What is cognitive dissonance? Does it apply here?
3. In Paragraph 1, how is the story of the patient as a “churchgoer and communicant” similar to the parable of the four soils (Matthew 13:1-23; also Titus 1:16)? What do we call that uneasy feeling that the patient is now experiencing even though he hasn’t committed some heinous sin (John 16:8)?
4. In Paragraph 2, how does this uneasy feeling lead to the patient being more reluctant in his thoughts about God (Gen 3:10; Luke 18:13; Job 23:15; Psalm 119:20)? Why will God not allow us to suppress this “uneasy feeling” totally (Heb 12:3-12)? How can we break the cycle of “performing” our religious duties and come back to God (Luke 18:13b; 1 John 1:9)? What attribute of God keeps us away from Him (Isaiah 6:3-5)? What attribute draws us to Him (Exodus 34:6-7; Romans 2:4)?
5. In Paragraph 3, how does the condition of the patient being more fully established coincide with the truth related to sin in Hebrews 11:25? Is it true that habits, even of pleasure, will eventually fade? Do you think this is why God doesn’t do miracles or other supernatural things for His children more “habitually”?
6. In Paragraph 3, Screwtape mentions that once the patient has entered this condition of “avoiding God” because something isn’t right in his life, he can be tempted with “nothing”. How is this slippery slope avoided so that we don’t get lulled into a form of complacency? How do we get out of this sense of guilt, complacency and lethargy in our walk with God (1 John 1:9; James 4:8)?
7. In Paragraph 3, what does Screwtape mean when says, “Christians describe the Enemy as one ‘without whom Nothing is strong’. And Nothing is very strong”? Why is it that this condition of nothingness, even the “labyrinth of reveries that have not even lust or ambition to give them a relish”?
8. In Paragraph 4, what is Screwtape’s ultimate and only long-term goal? How is he willing to accomplish this? What is so amazing about what Screwtape and other demons are willing to do according to 2 Cor 11:13-15 and Matthew 4:6?
9. In Paragraph 4, how does Screwtape describe the safest road to Hell? What do we know about the contrast between the road to hell and the narrow way (Matt 7:13-14)?