

THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS

by C. S. LEWIS

Letter # 6

“Overcoming Anxiety and Living in the Real Present”

MY DEAR WORMWOOD,

(0) I am delighted to hear that your patient's age and profession make it possible, but by no means certain, that he will be called up for military service. 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. He wants men to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them.

(1) Your patient will, of course, have picked up the notion that he must submit with patience to the Enemy's will. What the Enemy means by this is primarily that he should accept with patience the tribulation which has actually been dealt out to him—the present anxiety and suspense. It is about *this* that he is to say "Thy will be done", and for the daily task of bearing *this* that the daily bread will be provided. It is your business to see that the patient never thinks of the present fear as his appointed cross but only of the things he is afraid of.

(2) Let him regard them as his crosses: let him forget that, since they are incompatible, they cannot all happen to him, and let him try to practice fortitude and patience to them all in advance. For real resignation, at the same moment, to a dozen different and hypothetical fates, is almost impossible, and the Enemy does not greatly assist those who are trying to attain it: resignation to present and actual suffering, even where that suffering consists of fear, is far easier and is usually helped by this direct action.

(3) An important spiritual law is here involved. I have explained that you can weaken his prayers by diverting his attention from the Enemy Himself to his own states of mind about the Enemy. On the other hand fear becomes easier to master when the patient's mind is diverted from the thing feared to the fear itself, considered as a present and undesirable state of his own mind; and when he regards the fear as his appointed cross he will inevitably think of it as a state of mind. One can therefore formulate the general rule; in all activities of mind which favor our cause, encourage the patient to be un-self-conscious and to concentrate on the object, but in all activities favorable to the Enemy bend his mind back on itself. Let an insult or a woman's body so fix his attention outward that he does not reflect "I am now entering into the state called Anger—or the state called Lust". Contrariwise let the reflection "My feelings are now growing more devout, or more charitable" so fix his attention inward that he no longer looks beyond himself to see our Enemy or his own neighbors.

(4) As regards his more general attitude to the war, you must not rely too much on those feelings of hatred which the humans are so fond of discussing in Christian, or anti-Christian, periodicals. In his anguish, the patient can, of course, be encouraged to revenge himself by some vindictive feelings directed towards the German leaders, and that is good so far as it goes. But it is usually a sort of melodramatic or mythical hatred directed against imaginary scapegoats. He has never met these people in real life—they are lay figures modeled on what he gets from newspapers. The results of such fanciful hatred are often most disappointing, and of all humans the English are in this respect the most deplorable milksops. They are creatures of that miserable sort who loudly proclaim that torture is too good for their enemies and then give tea and cigarettes to the first wounded German pilot who turns up at the back door.

(5) Do what you will, there is going to be some benevolence, as well as some malice, in your patient's soul. The great thing is to direct the malice to his immediate neighbors whom he meets every day and to thrust his benevolence out to the remote circumference, to people he does not know. The malice thus becomes wholly real and the benevolence largely imaginary. There is no good at all in inflaming his hatred of Germans if, at

the same time, a pernicious habit of charity is growing up between him and his mother, his employer, and the man he meets in the train. 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. It is only in so far as they reach the will and are there embodied in habits that the virtues are really fatal to us. (I don't, of course, mean what the patient mistakes for his will, the conscious fume and fret of resolutions and clenched teeth, but the real center, what the Enemy calls the Heart.) All sorts of virtues painted in the fantasy or approved by the intellect or even, in some measure, loved and admired, will not keep a man from our Father's house: indeed they may make him more amusing when he gets there.

Your affectionate uncle
SCREWTAPE

Analysis Questions

1. In Paragraph 0, What is the goal of Screwtape for the patient as it relates to thoughts of the future? Compare Philippians 4:6-7; Luke 12:22-26, and Matthew 6:34. How does this contribute to contradictory pictures of the future which can arouse hope or fear? Compare Romans 8:28-39; Titus 1:2. What can we be certain of? Screwtape mentions there is nothing like suspense and anxiety to barricade our minds against God, how is this so? How does this compare with Hebrews 11:6, 3:7-19 and Matthew 13:58.
2. In paragraph 0, last sentence, how does Screwtape's interpretation of God's desire mesh with these passages: Matt 7:24-27; Eph 2:10; James 1:22-25; 3:13; Matt 21:28-32? Is he right or wrong? Also, how successful is the devil in keeping us thinking about what will [possibly] happen to us? How do we compare this with the Scriptures mentioned in Question 1?
3. In paragraph 1, Do you agree with Screwtape's theology of suffering and trials? Screwtape declares that it isn't the tribulation that is the patient's cross, but instead the fear and anxiety itself. Do you agree or disagree and why? Compare Phil 1:29; Acts 14:22; 1 Peter 4:19. How do we get blessed through these various tribulations (see James 1:12)?
4. In paragraph 2, how does Screwtape encourage Wormwood to direct the patient's thinking about the future? How does the patient practicing fortitude and patience to them in advance still miss the point? How does Exodus 3:14 apply here as it relates to God's description of Himself?
5. In paragraph 3, Screwtape speaks very articulately about encouraging us to focus on our own state of mind when we are growing more "spiritual", but to avoid focusing on our state of mind when we are sinning. How does this make sense? What is our propensity to blame others in sin and to think to highly of ourselves when doing right? Compare Romans 12:3; 16; Genesis 3:14-16.
6. In paragraph 4, how do these issues of stereotyping, prejudice, and mythical hatred against imaginary scapegoats come to bear in real life? How you ever experienced this?
7. In paragraph 5, how does Screwtape explain the success or failure in the patient's life as it relates to those things in the various concentric circles? How does this compare with Jesus' comments about the Christian life being difficult in Matthew 7:13-14 and taking up our crosses daily in Luke 9:23? According to Screwtape's theology what is God more concerned about in our lives, the daily life we live or the occasional act of goodness or malice?