

C. S. LEWIS – A BAPTIZED INTELLECT & IMAGINATION.

Hebrews 11 is a divine mandate to listen to people's stories.

It is a passage of Scripture that references story after story of faith; one person after another – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and on and on it goes.

The unmistakable implication of this chapter is that if we hear about the faith of others, and seek to imitate them, we are enabled to **“lay aside every weight and run with endurance the race that is set before us.”** {**Hebrews 12:1**}

Their example helps us to run our race.

God has always used human agents and their stories to stir and encourage his people.

Reflection on the stories of the faithful is one of the major ways through which we are able learn the wisdom of God's ways.

Listening to the stories of people from another time safeguards us from what **C. S. Lewis** called **‘Chronological snobbery;’** the foolishness of thinking that our age and time is the sum of wisdom.

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Being a student of people's stories is an **exercise in theology.**

Theology which is, at its simplest, seeking to know God, emerges from these real lives devoted to His cause.

Being a student of people's stories is an **exercise in psychology.**

It deepens our understanding of human nature, including, hopefully, our own.

Being a student of people's stories is an **exercise in prophecy.**

Prophetic vision involves not just foresight {future} or insight {present} but also hindsight {past}.

Last week we considered G. K. Chesterton – a study in warmth, wit and whimsy.

This morning I want to look at '**C. S. Lewis – baptized intellect and imagination.**'

It isn't possible to do justice to a life like Lewis in 35-40 minutes.

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I want to give you a brief overview of his life and then make some comments and simply hope I might have created a spark of interest that might lead you to explore a little further.

If you do explore further, it will, I'm sure, be of much profit to your own faith journey.

Lewis was born in the winter of 1898 in Belfast, the second son of a solicitor and of a clergyman's daughter.

His father, Albert, and his mother Florence both possessed first rate minds and loved literature.

They were very different as far as temperaments went.

Lewis commented,

“My father's people were true Welshmen, sentimental, passionate, and rhetorical, easily moved both to anger and to tenderness; men who laughed and cried a great deal and who had not much of the talent for happiness.”

Of his mother's side of the family he said,

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“The Hamilton’s were a cooler race. Their minds were critical and ironic and they had the talent for happiness in a high degree.”

In 1905, when Lewis was 7, he recalled that the first great change in his life took place.

The Lewis’ moved house.

This new house was almost a major character in his story.

He stated,

“I am a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of wind under the tiles.”

In his autobiography, **‘Surprised by Joy,’** C.S. Lewis recalled early memories of ‘endless books;’

“There were books in the study, books in the dining room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the attic, books of all kinds,” he remembered, and none were off limits to him.

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On rainy days-and there were many in Northern Ireland-he pulled volumes off the shelves and entered into worlds created by authors such as Conan Doyle, E. Nesbit, Mark Twain, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

After older brother Warren {Warnie} was sent off to boarding school in England. ‘Jack,’ as his family called him, became somewhat reclusive.

He spent more time in books and an imaginary world of “dressed animals” and “knights in armor,” But he did more than read books, he wrote and illustrated his own stories as well.

By the age of 6 or 7 he lived almost entirely in a world created by his imagination.

The novelist **Graham Greene** once commented,

“There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.”

Lewis seemed to have a number of these moments as a child; moments of brief transcendence. He called them,

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for want of a better term, moments of ‘joy.’ {Hence his book, ‘Surprised by joy.’}

He described one of these brief moments this way,

“ As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there, suddenly arose in me without warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton’s “enormous bliss of Eden,” comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? Not, certainly, for a biscuit tin filled with moss...”

The Germans have a word for it; they call it ‘**Sehnsucht.**’

It refers to an intense longing for something just beyond our reach. It’s like homesickness, but not for an earthly home. It happens in a fleeting moment when we see something or experience something that makes us long for the thing that this experience points to, but doesn’t fulfill the longing.

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In his autobiography he tells of three early encounters with this intense longing; these moments of ‘joy.’

Then he says,

“The reader who finds these three episodes of no interest need read this book no further, for in a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else.”

Later in hindsight he wrote,

“The book or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them, it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing They are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never visited.”

These moments were, as Greene suggested, moments that ‘let his future in,’ and the rest of his life was about the pursuit of, and the attempt to understand, these moments of ‘joy.’

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However he was shocked back to the present reality by the death of his beloved mother from cancer just month before his tenth birthday.

Not only did he lose a mother, his father never fully recovered from her death and became moody and withdrawn.

For many years thereafter, both boys felt estranged from their father, and home life was never warm and satisfying again.

He commented,

“With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of Joy; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.”

He had a rather horrific experience at the first boarding school he was sent to by his father.

It was a small private school run by a schoolmaster who was quite mad and was, after Lewis left, placed in an

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insane asylum. The schoolmaster's brutal treatment of the boys left a lasting scar on Lewis.

In his autobiography, Lewis called the school '**The Concentration Camp.**'

It had the effect of driving Lewis deeper and deeper into his inner world of books and imagination.

By autumn 1914 C.S. Lewis was somewhat adrift.

He had lost his childhood faith and his mother, and he felt alienated from his father. He was extremely close to his brother, but they saw one another only on holidays.

Lewis was then sent to Great Bookham, Surrey to be privately tutored by W.T. Kirkpatrick, a brilliant teacher and friend of Lewis's father.

"The Great Knock;" as the Lewis family dubbed Mr. Kirkpatrick, had a profound effect upon the teenage youth.

He introduced him to the classics in Greek, Latin, and Italian literature, and helped him make a beginning in German.

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Kirkpatrick not only led Lewis to great books, he pushed him to understand them in the original languages.

A most demanding tutor, Kirkpatrick helped Jack learn how to criticize and analyze, and he taught him how to think, speak, and write logically.

Consequently, after nearly three years with Kirkpatrick, C. S. Lewis was tough-minded and widely read.

Many years later Lewis wrote in ‘Surprised by Joy’ that **“My debt to him is very great. My reverence to this day undiminished.”**

Kirkpatrick was a rationalist. Although he never attacked religion in Lewis’ presence, his manner of thinking certainly rubbed off on Jack.

Lewis commented,

“My own Atheism and pessimism were fully formed before I went to Bookham. What I got there was merely fresh ammunition for the defence of a position already chosen.”

Kirkpatrick helped the young man prepare for scholarship examinations at Oxford, and the demanding mentor

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played no small role in Lewis's outstanding performance at University College.

Lewis entered the world of Oxford in 1917 as a student, and he never really left.

Despite an interruption to fight in World War I and his professorship at Cambridge beginning in 1955, he always maintained his home and friends in Oxford.

He loved the bookshops, the pubs, and the Bodleian library, and he reveled in the company of local men who loved to read, write and discuss books.

His attachment to Oxford was so strong that when he taught at Cambridge from 1955 to 1963 he commuted back to Oxford on weekends so that he could be close to familiar places and beloved friends.

A spiritual awakening began in Lewis.

He was impacted by reading books by G MacDonald and G.K. Chesterton.

One MacDonald volume called 'Phantastes,' had a powerful impact on his thinking.

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“What it actually did to me,’ wrote Lewis “was to convert, even to baptize, my imagination.”

At Oxford he continued to read MacDonald and he imbibed G.K. Chesterton as well. The latter author’s books, especially ‘The Everlasting Man,’ raised serious questions about the young intellectual’s materialism.

A close friend with whom he spent much time, Owen Barfield, became a Christian and frequently engaged Lewis in conversation about his materialism.

So did Nevill Coghill, a fellow student and lifelong friend who was brilliant, yet was, to Lewis’s amazement, **“a Christian and thorough-going super naturalist.”**

Soon after joining the English faculty at Magdalen College, Lewis met two more Christians, Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien.

These men became close friends of Lewis. He admired their brilliance and their logic.

Soon Lewis recognized that most of his friends, like his favorite authors, MacDonald, Chesterton, Johnson,

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Spenser and Milton held to this Christian angle of vision which threatened his whole world view.

He met with this group of men regularly to discuss their writings and views of everything from politic to religion.

They were called 'The Inklings,' and met in a local pub called 'The Eagle and The Child.' {They affectionately called it, 'The Bird and the Baby.'}

He began to increasingly feel the hound of heaven closing in on him.

I love the way he described it in 'Surprised by Joy,'

“The fox had been dislodged from Hegelian Wood and was running in the open... bedraggled and weary, hounds barely a field behind and nearly everyone now in the pack; Plato, Dante, MacDonald, Herbert, Barfield, Tolkien, Dyson, Joy itself. Everyone and everything had joined the other side. Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about ‘man’s search for God.’ To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat.”

He later wrote in his book Miracles,

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“It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. “Look out!” we cry, “it’s alive.” And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back --I would have done so myself if I could --and proceed no further with Christianity. An “impersonal God,” -- well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads --better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap--best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband --that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people, who have been dabbling in religion (“Man’s search for God!”) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us?

He then said,

“You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even

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for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”

Lewis' life was dramatically changed and the new Christian devoted his talent and energy to writing material that reflected his new found faith.

He became known as a 'literary evangelist.'

His material became immensely popular in the 1940's.

One by product of this fame was the mail he received from all over the world.

He was inundated with mail.

He answered it all personally, by hand, an enterprise that consumed hours every week in an already busy schedule.

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As book royalties mounted during the late 1940s, and continued to spiral upward thereafter Lewis refused to upgrade his standard of living.

Partly out of disdain for conspicuous living, but mostly out of commitment to Jesus Christ, he established a charitable fund for his royalty earnings.

Neither the extent nor the recipients of Lewis's charity are fully known. Indeed, he made valiant efforts to conceal this information. It is known that he supported numerous impoverished families, underwrote education fees for orphans and poor seminarians, and put monies into scores of charities and church ministries.

During the last decade of his earthly pilgrimage, Lewis's world was invaded by an American Woman and her two children.

In autumn 1952 Joy Davidman Gresham, who had become a Christian partly because she read 'The Great Divorce' and 'The Screwtape Letters,' visited her spiritual mentor in England.

Soon thereafter her husband abandoned her for another woman. In the meantime the divorcee, a writer in her

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own right, moved to London with her two adolescent boys, David and Douglas.

She fell into financial trouble. Her acquaintance with C.S. Lewis led to his underwriting the boarding school education of David and Douglas.

From charity and common literary interests grew a deep friendship, and eventually they were married in 1956.

Joy was sixteen years Lewis's junior, but that did not prevent a happy marriage.

Lewis's marriage to Joy Davidman did not enhance his reputation in Great Britain.

Long assumed to be a confirmed bachelor, the esteemed professor not only married late in life, he married an American who was at once Jewish, a divorcee, and personally rather abrasive.

The marriage did not sit well with most of Lewis's friends and acquaintances.

C.S. Lewis was hurt by the disapproval of his old friends and colleagues, but it was by no means a new experience for him.

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He was frequently under attack for his decidedly Christian lifestyle.

Close friends, among them Owen Barfield and J.R.R. Tolkien, openly disapproved of Lewis' evangelistic speaking and writing.

It was common knowledge that Lewis' "Christian" books caused so much disapproval that he was more than once passed over for a professorship at Oxford, with the honors going to men of lesser reputation.

It was Magdalene College at Cambridge University that finally honored Lewis with a chair in 1955 and thereby recognized his original and important contributions to English literary history and criticism.

A savage case of cancer, however, cut short the Lewis' life together. After several years of reprieve from an earlier and nearly fatal bout with cancer, Joy Lewis passed away in Oxford July 13, 1960.

Her death, like that of his mother's, dealt Lewis a severe blow.

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In a book written after Joy's death, called '**A Grief Observed**,' he expressed the raw grief, anger and confusion that he battled with over the next few years.

Lewis' own health began to fail in the early 1960's – he battled with kidney failure and then in 1963 he suffered a heart attack and died on the 22nd November 1963 – on the same day President Kennedy was assassinated.

It's really hard to pick a couple of lessons from Lewis' life and writings to focus on– there are so many memorable ideas, thoughts and arguments one might, with great profit follow.

I think that among the things I most appreciate about Lewis are his razor sharp apologetic insights – compellingly rational and logical – with regard God's existence.

His book '**Mere Christianity**,' is widely regarded as a classic and huge numbers of people would say that it was, at least, a significant aid in their journey of faith, if not the decisive factor.

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I can't comment on everything in the book – you probably need to read it yourself – but one of the most often quoted aspects of its contents has been termed **'Lewis' Trilemma.'**

Lewis develops the argument that Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic or he was Lord.

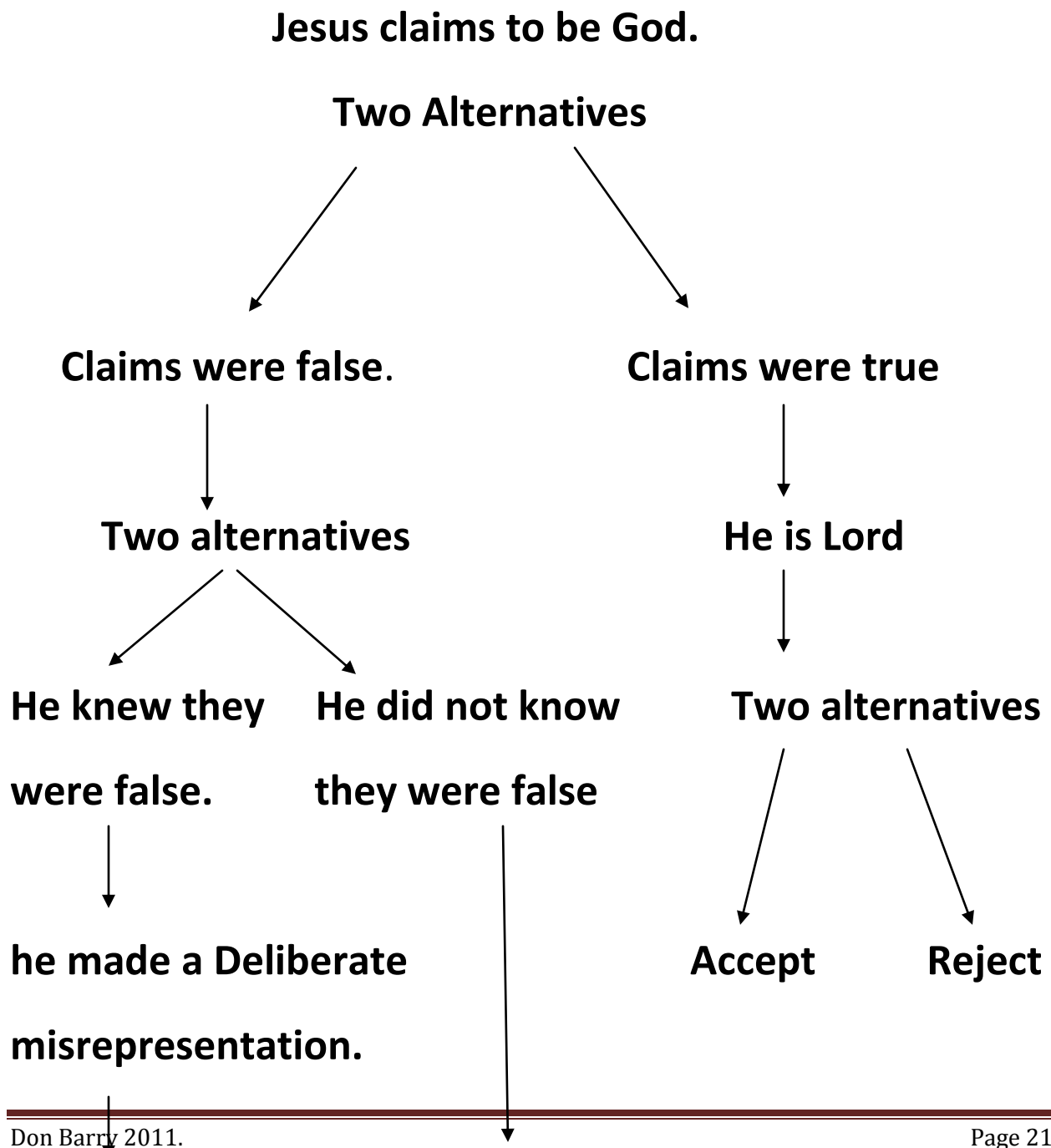
He wrote,

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God:' that is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg-- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not I come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great

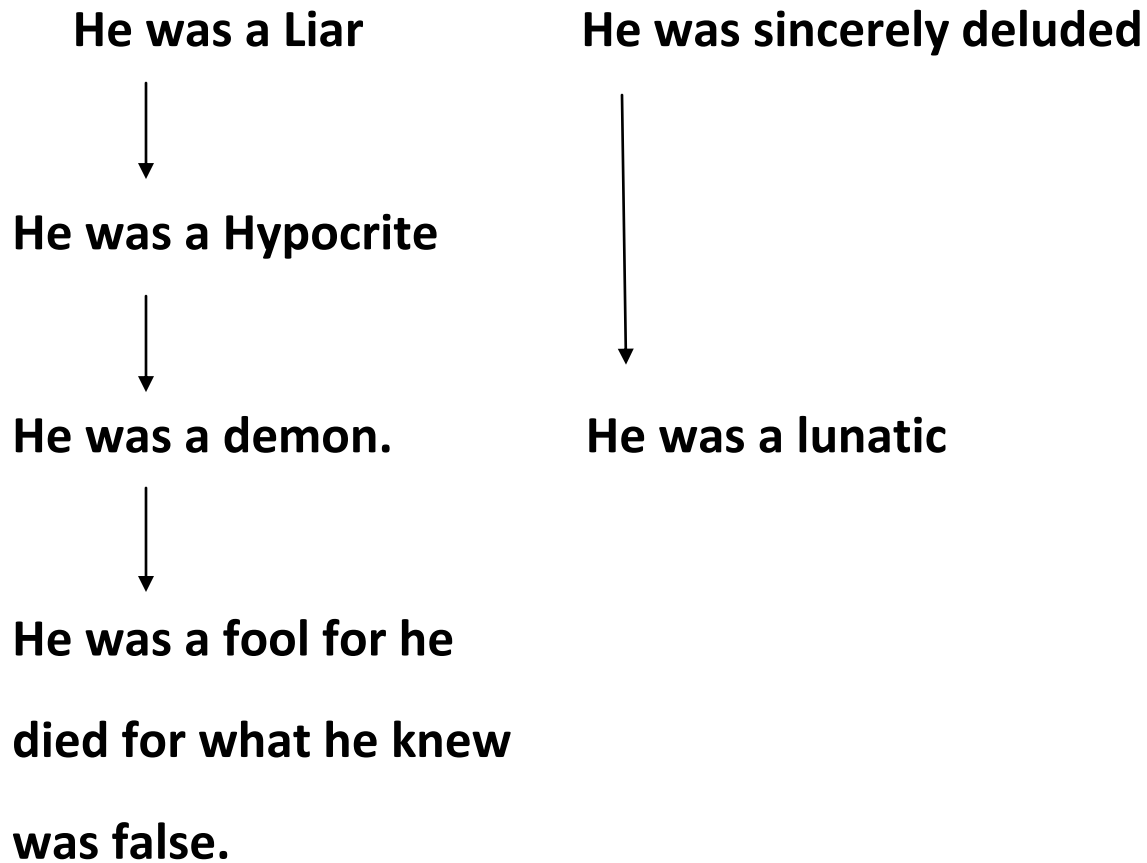
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human teacher. He has not left that open to us, He did not intend to.”

Josh McDowell, famously diagrammed Lewis’ argument.



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It's simple, devastatingly clear and compelling.

In Lewis we see an obviously brilliant intellect which is a servant of spiritual purposes.

He was however much more than simply a rational mind.

He had a deeply spiritual, even mystical dimension to his life.

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His mystical experiences with transcendence – the thing he called ‘joy,’ were in many ways, as he commented, the centre of his life.

His novels, especially the ‘Narnia series’ are full of mystical experiences. In them Lewis peaks behind the curtain; enters the wardrobe into another world filled with spiritual battles and spiritual powers.

Though he had a sharp intellect, he made room in his thinking for myth, magic and mysticism.

In his work called ‘Letters to Malcolm, chiefly on prayer,’ he spoke more about his thoughts on mysticism.

I think it’s helpful to remember Lewis died in 1963 – he saw the counter culture of the 1960’s developing. {This counter culture sowed the seeds for the full blown Post modernism that rules our culture}

He saw a generation, tired of materialism, empty, longing for meaning and seeking out mystical experiences in drugs and Eastern religions.

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Though he believed mystical experiences were real experiences and not simply illusions, he had some very wise words of warning.

He observed that many different religious groups as well as people who had psychedelic drug-enhanced experiences claimed to have mystical experiences. This he did not dispute.

He commented,

“A mystical experience is similar for all who have them, but say nothing of whether they are positive or negative in their impact.”

He likened a mystical experience to putting out to sea as a sailor.

For all who put out to sea the phenomenon are the same – the land dropping beneath the horizon, the birds becoming fewer and fewer, the salty taste of the sea air.

It is the same for every person going to sea be they trader, pirate, tourist or missionary.

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These experiences say nothing about the lawfulness of the experience. The lawfulness of the experience depends on the purpose of the voyage.

He observed that though drugs or false religions may give mystical experiences that are, in so many ways, indistinguishable from Christian mystical experiences doesn't make them equally valid and lawful.

“Departures are all alike; it is the landfall that crowns the voyage.”

“Mysticism in and of itself is not a proof of sanctity.”

Drugs and demons can create 'departure experiences.'

In an age where for many propositional truth alone hasn't satisfied and they are engaged in seeking meaning in mysticism; in finding the divine within, Lewis' words as relevant as when he first spoke them.

I recommend Lewis to you. Many people know his name; fewer have explored his writings and benefited from his insights. Those who have are prone to quote him often!