

STUDY GUIDE to
Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer
By C.S. Lewis

Introduction

Letters to Malcolm was the final book Lewis wrote, and it was published posthumously in 1964. Lewis never intended this to be a book of instruction on *how* to pray, (“for me to offer the world instruction about prayer would be impudence”), rather he wanted readers to view it as a record of “two people on the foothills comparing notes in private”. As such, *Letters to Malcolm* is peculiarly addressed to the converted intellectual, still struggling to understand the purpose of prayer, and what is actually happening when we pray.

Background

“The reviewer of *Letters to Malcolm* for the *The Times Literary Supplement* of 27 February 1964 noted that the ‘secret’ of Lewis’ power ‘probably lay in the fact that he had himself found the way to Christian belief with great difficulty; he genuinely knew what it was like not to believe; he could never therefore quite see himself in the position of someone who, untroubled by doubts, simply hands out the Faith.’ We find a fine illustration of this in Lewis’ initial attempts to write something on prayer:

The modern man who has come to Christianity as an adult may begin to feel uncomfortable. Are we not making our relation to our Creator far too Personal?... And if this is so, is it not really ‘putting back the clock’ to re-introduce a crudely personal approach on the highest level of all? Is not prayer simply the last survival of savage, pre-philosophical, thinking? Now for certain people at certain moments this objection is positively a healthy one. Some who have always been Christians, and whose adult prayers are still much too like the prayers they made in childhood, who still in their heart of hearts think of God only as a Big Man in the sky, may easily take the prayer far too much for granted. The possibility of personal intercourse between the little, hairless bipeds called Men and the inconceivable, self-existent Being which underlies all phenomena and all space and time, may seem to such people nothing surprising, nothing that we had not a right to expect. If the fact that it appears outrageous to those who have had a purely scientific upbringing startles any such Christian into the realization that, in a sense it is outrageous, not to be thought of without amazement and trembling, then it will have done him good. There is a certain type of Christian (I suspect I am of that type myself) who often needs to learn reverence from a certain type of Agnostic.

adapted from Walter Hooper’s C.S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide

Suggestions

The two sets of questions in this section are meant to cater to different needs. The study questions are for those who want to concentrate on the text itself, and the more generalized questions are intended to prompt a more fluid discussion of issues raised by it. You may wish to mix and match questions from both sections, or add some of your own, depending on how much time you have at your disposal and the level of group interest.

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A word on the Anglican Liturgy

Liturgy: a prescribed form of worship in which worshippers listen to and/or repeat set prayers and statements of faith in a common order of service. Anglican, Episcopal, Catholic and Orthodox churches traditionally use liturgical patterns of worship when they meet together.

Lewis attended services at his local Anglican church in Headington, Oxford, after his conversion, and would have been most familiar with the patterns of liturgical worship laid out in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. As part of the weekly service of communion Lewis would have recited the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; But deliver us from evil. Amen

and the Nicene Creed:

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made: Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man, And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord and giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, Who spake by the Prophets. And I believe one Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. I look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the life of the world to come. Amen.

Those who would like to read more of the 1662 order of service can find it on the web at <http://www.eskimo.com/~lhowell/bcp1662>

Although he did not live long enough to use the revised order of service introduced in 1980 as "The Alternative Service Book" (ASB), Lewis was fully aware of the Church's plans for updating the phraseology of the liturgy, and took an interest in contemporary disputes over whether (and how) the traditional service should be altered. His consideration of corporate prayer in the first part of *Letters to Malcolm* includes some discussion of the liturgy and of the best way of using set patterns of worship and questions how much the service should be changed.

Note

The Bishop of Woolwich, the Reverend John Robinson, whom Lewis mentions several times in his letters, became famous in the 1960s for his book *Honest to God* in which he questioned the meaning of God, the divinity of Jesus, and the supernatural events of the Bible. For Lewis, Robinson was a key example of liberal apostasy, and the object of many passing quips.

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Intensive Study

Letters 1 – 5

- (1) “My whole liturgical position really boils down to an entreaty for permanence and uniformity.” What, according to Lewis, are the advantages of permanence and uniformity in worship?
- (2) “For me words are, in any case, secondary.” Secondary to what?
- (3) What, according to Lewis, are the uses of ready-made prayers? Why would he be reluctant to make them the staple of his prayer life?
- (4) “There is clearly a theological defence for it [praying to the Saints]... there is clearly also a great danger.” What is the danger, and what is the defense?
- (5) How might it help us to remember that we are a part of “all the company of heaven” when we pray?
- (6) “I’d rather pray sitting in a crowded train than put it off till midnight when one reaches a hotel bedroom...” What, according to Lewis, are the best conditions for prayer? Do you have any recommendations of your own?
- (7) “The body ought to pray as well as the soul.” How might the body be used as an aid to prayer?
- (8) “This talk of ‘meeting’ is, no doubt, anthropomorphic... that is why it must be balanced by all manner of metaphysical and theological abstractions. But never, here or anywhere else, let us think that while anthropomorphic images are a concession to weakness, the abstractions are the literal truth.”
 - (a) Why aren’t the abstractions the literal truth?
 - (b) Would you agree with Lewis that anthropomorphic images of God and/or the activity of prayer are a concession to human weakness?
- (9) What are the three different senses of heaven Lewis talks about in reference to “thy kingdom come”? How does this help him visualize the coming of the kingdom? What do you understand by the term?
- (10) “I am beginning to feel that we need a preliminary act of submission not only towards possible future afflictions but also towards possible future blessings...” Why might this be necessary? Do you agree with Lewis?
- (11) “It would be rash to say that there is any prayer which God *never* grants. But the strongest candidate is the prayer we might express in the single word *encore*.” Why?
- (12) “I was never worried myself by the words *lead us not into temptation*, but a great many of my correspondents are.” Why might some Christians find this a worry? How does Lewis deal with it himself?

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Letters 6 – 10

- (13) “I can well understand how a man who is trying to love God and his neighbor should come to dislike the very word *religion*.” Is Lewis being too strong here, or do you think religion can sometimes work against Christianity?
- (14) What does Lewis say about the role of the conscience in prayer?
- (15) Could a determinist pray? [A determinist is someone who believes that the outcome of all our actions, and even the actions themselves, are pre-determined]
- (16) Do you agree with Lewis that anxieties are to be regarded as afflictions rather than sins?
- (17) How does Jesus’ example in Gethsemane help us understand prayer?
- (18) “Strictly causal thinking [i.e., the idea that our prayers are what prompts God to act] is... inadequate when applied to the relation between God and man.” Why might causal thinking, in regard to prayer, create problems for us?
- (19) “Never take the images [of God] literally... when the purport of the images – what they say to our fear and hope and will and affections – seems to conflict with the theological abstractions, trust the purport of the images every time.” Do you agree that images of God in the Bible are always truer than theological abstractions we extract from it?
- (20) Do you agree with Lewis that prayer would be meaningless without belief in a God who takes a personal interest in us?

Letters 11 – 15

- (21) What do you make of the “embarrassing” New Testament promises about receiving whatever we ask for in faith?
- (22) Did you find Lewis’ comments on mysticism helpful?
- (23) Do you agree that “our prayers for others flow more easily than those we offer on our own behalf”?
- (24) Can you identify with “the haunting fear that there is no one listening” when we pray? What is the best way of tackling it?
- (25) “Of each creature we can say “this also is Thou: neither is this Thou.” In what sense are we, and in what sense aren’t we, a part of God?
- (26) “...a safe god, a tame god, soon proclaims himself to any sound mind as a fantasy.” Do you agree?

Letters 15 – 22

- (27) “...the moment of prayer is for me – or involves for me as its condition – the awareness, the re-awakened awareness, that this “real world” and “real self” are very far from being rock-

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bottom realities...if that can be done, there is no need to go anywhere else. This situation itself is, at every moment, a possible theophany. Here is the holy ground.” Why, in Lewis’ view, are our apprehensions of the world and the self not the same as ‘rock-bottom realities’? Do you agree with Lewis that our awareness of this reality as a charade puts us in the right frame of mind for an encounter with God?

- (28) “I have tried to make every pleasure into a channel of adoration.” How might we do that?
- (29) “Dance and game are frivolous, unimportant down here; for ‘down here’ is not their natural place. Here, they are a moment’s rest from the life we were placed here to live. But in this world everything is upside down. That which, if it could be prolonged here, would be a truancy, is likest that which in a better country is the End of ends. Joy is the serious business of Heaven.” What do you think of Lewis’ projection of the heavenly life?
- (30) How does Lewis’ explain God’s “wrath” when we are disobedient in Letter 18?
- (31) “I have found (to my regret) that the degrees of shame and disgust which I actually feel at my own sins do not at all correspond to what my reason tells me about their comparative gravity.” How do you think our feelings can complicate the matter of repentance?
- (32) Did you find Lewis’ brief comments on communion helpful? If so, in what ways?
- (33) Lewis believes in Purgatory and in praying for the dead. Would you agree with the following?
- (a) his belief in purgatory
 - (b) his picture of it
 - (c) his idea that we can pray for the dead.
- (34) “Our prayers, and other free acts, are known to us only as we come to the moment of doing them. But they are eternally in the score of the great symphony.” Do you think Lewis’ understanding of God as acting outside time is helpful?
- (35) “I haven’t any language weak enough to depict the weakness of my spiritual life.” Lewis finds that his own experiences of God are very slight when analyzed in terms of feelings and movements of the mind. Could you say the same thing?
- (36) “We shrink from too naked a contact, because we are afraid of the divine demands upon us which it might make too audible.” Have you ever found that sometimes you’d rather not go to God because you’d rather not be asked to obey him?
- (37) Can you identify with Lewis’ notion that God transforms even our past memories into the process of glorification? Have any of your memories been so transformed?

General Questions

- (1) “To pray successfully without words one needs to be at the top of one’s form.” Do you agree with Lewis that it is possible to pray successfully without words?
- (2) “You make things far too snug and confiding. Your erotic analogy needs to be supplemented by ‘I fell at his feet as one dead.’” (Letter 2) Is there ever a danger of our being over-familiar

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with God in prayer? How can we guard against this?

- (3) Still, "It would be better not to be reverent at all than to have a reverence that denied the proximity." Do you agree with Lewis that it is still better to be overly-familiar with God in prayer, than overly-distant out of a misplaced reverence for him?
- (4) "The stakes have to be raised before we take the game quite seriously." Have you found this to be true in your experience of prayer? When have the stakes been raised for you?
- (5) "We must lay before him what is in us, not what ought to be in us." Do you agree?
- (6) "The abstraction is fatal. It will make the life of lives inanimate and the love of loves impersonal." In what ways can we make God into an abstraction?
- (7) "It would be rash to say that there is any prayer which God never grants. But the strongest candidate is the prayer we might express in the single word *encore*." Why?
- (8) What do you make of the "embarrassing" New Testament promises about receiving whatever we ask for in faith?
- (9) "*Mettez-vous en la presence de Dieu*." What ways do you find helpful for "placing yourself in the presence of God"?
- (9) "Every idea of Him we form, He must in mercy shatter." Discuss this statement.
- (10) What is the proper way for us to appreciate our pleasures?
- (11) "Forgiving and being forgiven are two names for the same thing." Do you think Lewis is right to see a relationship between the giving and receiving of forgiveness?
- (12) "No evil habit is so ingrained nor so long prayed against (as it seemed) in vain, that it cannot even in dry old age, be whisked away." Should we ever give up praying for anything?
- (13) "The really disquieting thing is that it [prayer] should have to be numbered among duties at all." Why do you think we are apt to find prayer a 'duty'?
- (14) "The moral realm, the realm of duty, exists to be transcended." How might we transcend the realm of duty?