

Good and Evil in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: Theological Themes in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis

Earl Palmer

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C. S. Lewis was a theologian as well as a storyteller. The moment we dare to say, "I believe," or endeavor to explain to someone what we believe, we are then doing theology. Clive Staples Lewis played that role in just about everything he wrote—even in his personal correspondence.

When asked why he wrote children's stories, Lewis answered, "I turned to fairy tales, because that seemed to be the form that certain ideas and images in my mind seemed to demand, as a man might turn to fugues because the musical phrases in his head seemed to him to be good fugal subjects. When I wrote *Lion* I had no notion of writing the others. Writing children's stories modified my habits of composition. It imposed strict limits on my vocabulary; it excluded erotic love; it cut down reflective and analytical passages; it led me to produce chapters of nearly equal length for convenience in reading aloud. All those restrictions did me great good."

The Chronicles

Three grand themes are present in every one of Lewis's *Chronicles*, and each is theological in the way it looks at the possibility of the existence of God.

The first theme is the affirmation of life seen in Lewis's respect for the earth itself and for the human beings who become characters in the story. The characters are made in God's image and are given freedom to choose, in small and large ways, just as God has freedom to choose. Great stories respect that goodness in creation. Without that fundamental respect, there would be no possibilities for a story where love happens, or for heartbreak and crises to happen. It is this first ground rule that makes all adventure (or even romantic) stories possible.

The second theme in every great story is the understanding and realistic portrayal of the crises of bad choices and harmful decisions. Whether the story is a fantasy or a

real-world story, that depiction of a crisis and of its harm to the characters is at the heart of every adventure and every scene of danger.

The third grand theme is the portrayal of the good that emerges in the story. Even in a pessimistic tale, where tragedy is the end line of the final chapter, there nevertheless must be a counterpoint of good that stands in contrast against the wrongness that seems to win because of the author's artistic decision.

In every great story these three themes need to appear, and this means that a battle of epic consequences between good and evil is under way. When we read *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the seven stories that C. S. Lewis wrote for us, we find that they contain all three of these grand themes. They begin with the innocence of children exploring an old house and then, because of a game of hide and seek, the youngest of the children stumbles into a wondrous, beautiful new world of snow,

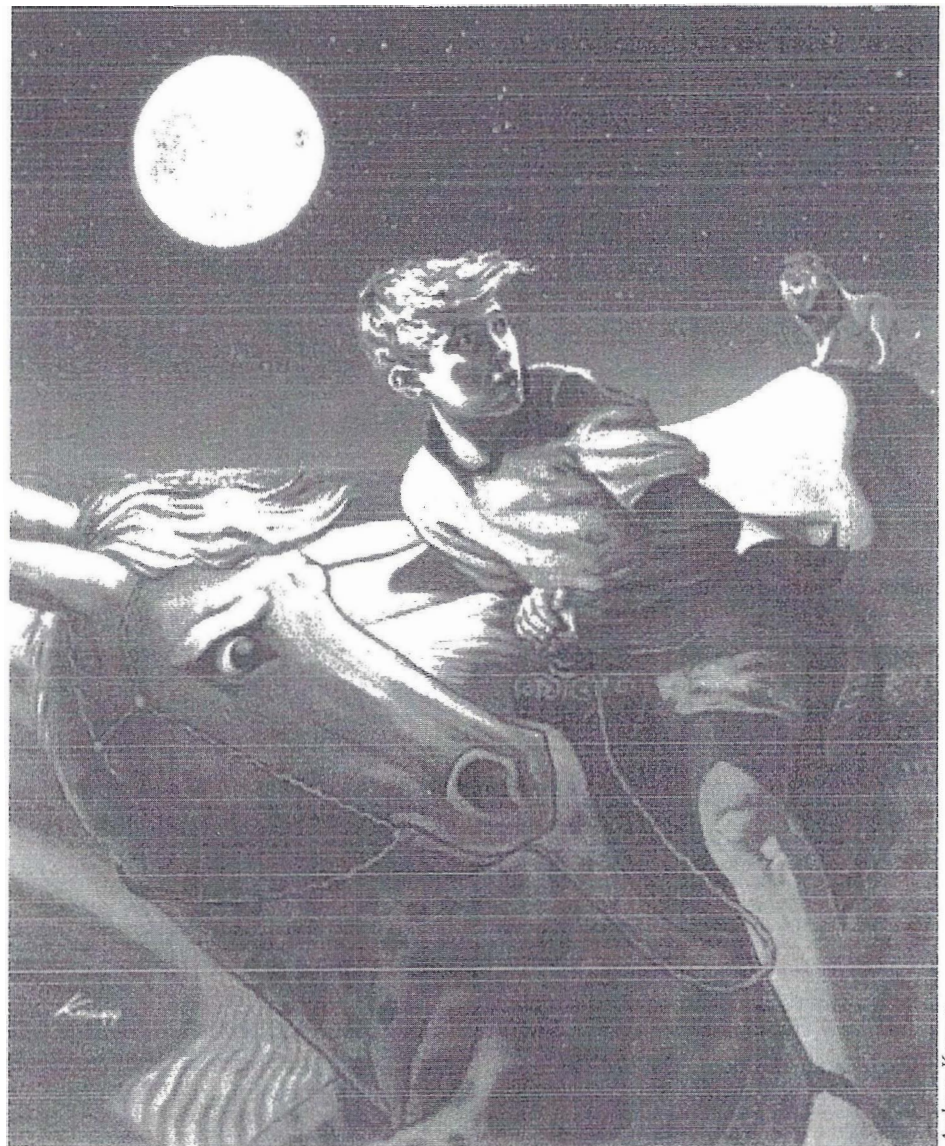
a glowing lamppost, a friendly Faun, and an act of protective kindness toward this little girl Lucy by that Faun named Mr. Tumnus. She meets up with a strange kind of goodness, but soon in the story when her brother Edmund enters that charmed world, the second theme appears.

It is not the problems of youth getting lost in a forest, but of something more ominous and threatening. The children meet up with a grave danger—with evil. The expert storyteller that Lewis is gradually draws us along with the four English children into that danger in Narnia. What is it they find? First they find the beauty of Narnia, but soon a second theme unfolds: the reality of evil.

Evil is not portrayed as a formless, mindless force, or as simply human avarice or human wrath. Nor does Lewis see it as a natural disaster, like earthquakes or fire. Lewis accepts the Biblical portrayal of evil as a moral, cosmic, personal will against the will of God. Cosmic (that is to say, spiritual) and moral (not just natural, as in tornadoes), it is personal will intentionally against the will of God.” C. S. Lewis in the 1960 preface to *Screwtape Letters* says:

“Now; if by the ‘devil’ you mean a power opposite to God and like God, self-existed for all eternity, the answer is certainly no. God has no opposite . . . the proper question is whether I believe in devils. I do. That is to say, I believe in angels, and I believe that some of these, by the abuse of their free will, have become enemies of God.”

We need to ask what characteristics of evil are portrayed by Lewis. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and in *The Magician’s Nephew*, evil is cold. It is interesting that



Andrew Knaupp

Lewis used an image of coldness and ice to refer to the devil, whereas it is common to think of the devil with the language of fire. Even in Dante the devil is encased in ice. So perhaps Lewis was influenced by Dante. In *The Magician’s Nephew*, the deplorable world is cold, and in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when the children first come into Narnia, they learn that for many, many years it has been winter without Christmas, and everything is cold. When we think about that coldness we find that it makes things work well for the winter Queen. Her castle is a vast ice sculpture. Sleighs work well on the cold snow.

A second way in which evil is portrayed by Lewis in these novels is its role in the winter Queen as the one who is the tempter. Evil tempts by deception. In *The Silver Chair*, in one incredible scene the Emerald Queen tempts the children, trying to make them think that what they knew in the above ground world as the real sun is not the sun. Rather the sphere she holds and sways before them is the real sun. She tempts them by deception. In *The Last Battle*, we have the most blatant temptation, where a donkey has a lion’s skin put over him by his master. This false Aslan is marched before the people who are directed to bow and to wor-

ship him.

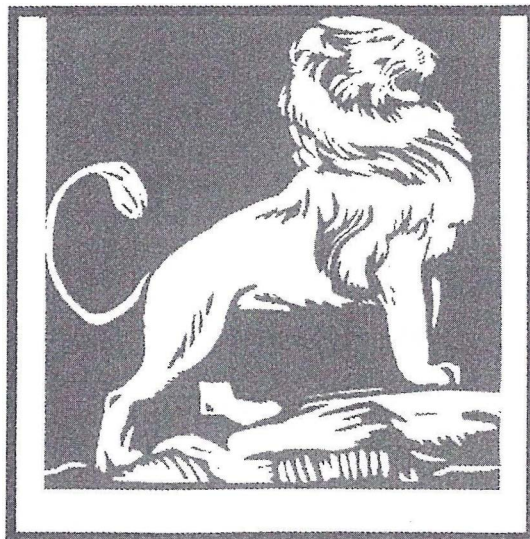
Evil tempts with desire. The first temptation in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is when the winter Queen tempts Edmund with Turkish Delight. He gets a taste of it with one delicious piece that magically appears but he never gets any more. His desire is made intense because of the memory of that one taste. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis portrays temptation as "an ever increasing appetite for an ever decreasing pleasure." Edmund hears the promise of more Turkish Delight, but he never receives it.

There is also the temptation to virtue. This temptation is perhaps the most subtle of all. We see that in *The Magician's Nephew*. Digory was sent on a mission by Aslan to bring him an apple from a hidden garden in the north of Narnia. At that garden he is tempted by the witch Jadis to take the apple and not to bring it to Aslan.

He is told by the witch that, were he to keep the apple, it would help his mother get well. The witch tells him, "If you'll take the apple, it will cure your mother." So Digory is tempted to distrust Aslan in order to help his mother. Each of these temptations becomes a part of Lewis's whole portrayal.

Evil is also portrayed as the destroyer. We see that in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when Lucy comes back to Mr. Tumnus's house and finds that it has been destroyed, and later when Edmund discovers that Mr. Tumnus has been turned into stone.

In every great story the heroes and other characters must fight against evil, fall under its spell, or combinations of both. We see this in *Perelandra*, where the deadly battle between Ransom and Weston becomes a good/bad struggle down into the nethermost parts of the earth, with the final victory of Ransom. In *That Hideous Strength*, we also see the battle between hideous



evil and the true reality of good.

Evil is portrayed by Lewis as powerful, but not permanently powerful. This is an important and continuous theme. There is a cumulative power and growth of power in *That Hideous Strength*. Evil gets stronger and stronger over Mark, a young scientist who falls more and more under its control. We watch how, in single steps, evil gathers momentum. But in the end, evil suffers from inner collapse. In *That Hideous Strength*, the marvelous surprise happens at the banquet, when chaos begins to develop: a new tower of Babel, then the horror of confusion, and the inner collapse of cruelty in the end. It's what happens to evil. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, evil is powerful but Aslan is more powerful, and evil is finally judged. Rabadash is judged—judged redemptively, but judged. And, finally, in *The Last Battle*, Tash is defeated.

The apostle Paul said it in Romans 5, "Where sin increased, the grace of God increased more." The best adventure stories in their own way are a commentary on that sentence.

One question always has to be faced. Should we read stories of the marvelous that dare to portray the reality of the crisis of evil? In thinking of the fantasy elements of stories like *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Lord*

of the Rings by J. R. R. Tolkien, the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling, or even a book like *The Shack*? Should we encourage youth to read books that feature the battle between good and evil in the territory of human imagination? Yes, I believe that they are a part of a healthy diet of every reader, including children. There are always age-appropriate questions but children who are deprived of healthy fantasy will nevertheless still be fascinated with fantasy. The key is not to ask if fantasy should be in their reading diet, but rather what kind of fantasy, good or bad.

The third theme is also present in the stories of C.S. Lewis. Lewis believed in the existence of ultimate good, and that became the major theme in all of his writings. The sense of ultimate good is present in the "space trilogy"—*Perelandra*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, and *That Hideous Strength*—a more hidden sense. In Tolkien's marvelous trilogy, the ultimate good is also hidden yet present. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis dared to show ultimate good as really knowable by mere men and women, boys and girls. The hiddenness and the mysterious element of ultimate good is still present, but he dares to portray good in profoundly knowable, personal terms, yet preserving the mystery and the wonder. Good becomes specific and concrete in the great lion, Aslan.

We see it in the description of Aslan in *The Silver Chair*, when Jill first sees Aslan: "It lay with its head raised and its two forepaws out in front of it, like the lions in Trafalgar Square. She knew at once that it had seen her. For its eyes looked straight into hers for a moment and then turned away—as if it knew her quite well and didn't think much of her."

"'If I run away it will be after me in a moment,' thought Jill. 'And if I go on, I'll run right into its mouth.' Anyway, she couldn't have moved if she had tried, and she couldn't take her eyes off it. How long this lasted,

she could not be sure; it seemed like hours. And the thirst became so bad that she almost felt she would not mind being eaten by the lion if only she could be sure of getting a mouthful of water first.

"If you're thirsty, you may drink."

That was the voice of Aslan, the ultimate good in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Aslan is the "son of the Emperor beyond the Sea."

Notice how we meet this profound, personal good. At first, we are unaware that a meeting is to take place. Aslan calls people into Narnia and there's always a sense of surprise and wonder and excitement when they actually met him.

Aslan is encountered first through the words of others about him. That's just like we first meet Christ, by words said about him. The Scriptures are words about Christ. Perhaps somebody tells you about him. Remember in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver tell the children about Aslan. And then it slips out that Aslan is a lion. Who would want to meet a lion? "Is he quite safe?" Susan asks. And then comes one of the great lines of C. S. Lewis, when Mr. Beaver says, "'Safe? ... Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good.'"

Aslan is not a tame lion. He's not safe, but he's good. So here they meet him first through what others say about him.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the children next meet him by signs that they miss at first, or don't understand. This is one of the subtle, important themes in *The Chronicles*, that there are signs about Aslan that people miss. You remember the first sign; everybody misses it until they read *The Magician's Nephew*. That is the lamppost. Five novels later you realize why the lamppost is there. It's a sign hidden though present: a sign of evil and a sign of good.

The second sign in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* is the mysterious thaw. The slush and the mud

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are signs that Aslan is moving in the East. When he is moving, the winter begins to thaw. The beautiful thing about the thaw is that when it first comes, the sledge has a terrible time moving. Finally, it ends up in pure mud and slush and guck, and that's a sign that Aslan's there. He can be uncomfortable to have around.

Then, of course, in the most definitive way we discover who Aslan is by what he does. Here C. S. Lewis is in agreement with the theologian Karl Barth. Barth argues that we cannot divide the words of Jesus from the work of Jesus. They're inseparable. Lewis portrays the same thing in his stories: the words and the work are inseparable. We know Aslan by what he does: the creation of Narnia itself. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Aslan sings, and while he sings, the world of Narnia comes into being. This may be a portrayal of Genesis 1 when "God said, 'Let there be light.'" Lewis changed the speech to a song. As Aslan walks and sings, Narnia grows into existence.

Second, we learn who Aslan is by what he does in redemption. He doesn't speak the word of forgiveness to Edmund who is the traitor; he takes Edmund's place. And in all of *The Chronicles of Narnia* the most terrifying scene is that moment when Aslan surrenders himself to the winter witch in place of Edmund. A victory seems to be won against this humiliated lion. In Lewis's story that

act of redemption is never repeated. Aslan dies once; he doesn't die over and over again. And from then on, everything builds on that singular redemption. A little later, Eustace becomes a dragon and has a painful need to be de-dragoned. It is Aslan who de-dragons him. Only Aslan can do it.

So we know Aslan by what he does. We learn of the gift of healing grace as Eustace tells Edmund what it was like to be de-dragoned:

"I took all these scales off. Aslan said to me, 'Undress.' And I tried to undress to get into that pool of water, and I kept taking off scales after scales after scales of dragon. And I looked around and there I was. I could repent, but I couldn't get all the dragon off. And finally Aslan said, 'Liedown.' So I lay down. And then he took his great claw ... and it hurt ... I felt like he was putting his claw all the way through to my heart. And he ripped off the dragon. And there I was like a peeled onion underneath."

That's the language of Lewis. "And he took me, and I was sure smarting ... and he took me a boy again, and he threw me in the wa-ter." There isn't a word spoken, Aslan does something. Redemption by Aslan is not a word spoken but an event that occurs. Jesus Christ died for us. What ultimate good is and what ultimate good does are now united in Lewis's theology.

Now, finally, Edmund (and we) discover who Aslan is.

Lewis portrays his healing grace in *Horse and His Boy*, where the boy Shasta is alone on a mountain pass "and being very tired and having nothing inside him, he felt so sorry for himself that tears rolled down his cheeks. It is then that he encounters a large lion, and at first is very frightened. feeling very sorry for him-self. Then he encounters a large lion and at first he is very frightened. But, in a Large Voice, the lion says, "Tell me your sorrows." Shasta recounts his ordeals, including being chased by lions.

"I do not call you unfortunate,"

said the Large Voice.

" 'Don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?' said Shasta.

" 'There was only one lion,' said the Voice.

" 'What on earth do you mean? I've just told you there were at least two the first night, and—' [here Aslan interrupts him].

" 'There was only one: but he was swift of foot.'

" 'How do you know?'

" 'I was the lion.'

"As Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the lion's Large Voice continued. 'I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time.' . . .

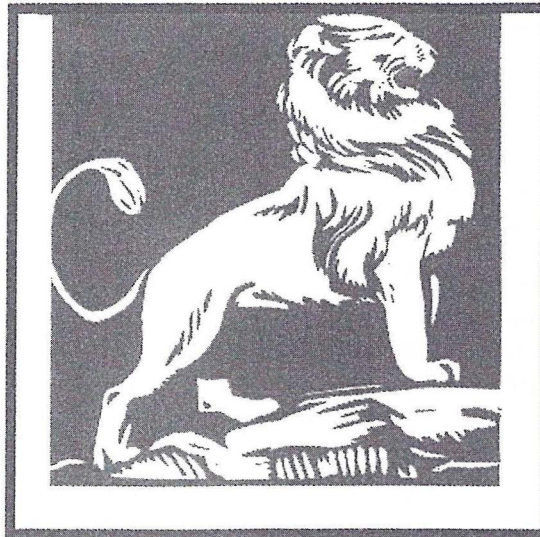
" 'Who are you?' asked Shasta.

" 'Myself,' said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook."

That is Aslan, who makes himself known. Lewis has broken new ground: he has dared to portray ultimate good as knowable.

A fourth major theme might be described as the "dynamics of discovery," referring to the faith-and-grace tension: the dynamics of faith. In Lewis's novels our freedom and our doubt are never either ridiculed or ignored. Faith develops by gradual steps in every case. We see this in Shasta.

That same sort of dynamic discovery appears in most of the characters. In *Prince Caspian*, the meeting with Aslan takes time. Lewis seemed to see discipleship as a thousand single steps. He knew this from his own life, and it is portrayed in his novels. Also, in every case Lewis points out the role that others play in aiding us. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, of course, it's that inquisitive and funny-looking professor. And when we finally read *The*



Magician's Nephew, we discover who that professor is.

I have often thought that if I were going to teach a course on evangelism, one of the most helpful portrayals of what an evangelist should be like is the professor and the way he relates to those children. He knows that Aslan must finally answer our questions and prove himself, but the professor helps the children keep their minds open and keep asking questions.

In all the novels, Aslan himself is the one who must assure us and must "qualify" us. In *The Last Battle*, it is Aslan who finally calls those who enter the small doorway Farther up and Farther in. Only Aslan can de-dragon Eustace and turn him back into a boy.

In the dynamics of belief, the thing that's important to see is that each faith journey takes time. It's a gradual, growing discovery of who Aslan is, and it is Aslan who has the final word.

A fifth major theme in C. S. Lewis's fiction is what may be described as the "way of discipleship." So far we've looked at his teaching about evil, about ultimate good, about faith, and now we'll look at his teaching about the lifelong implications of it all.

How are we to understand the way of discipleship? What does it mean to follow Aslan? In Lewis's un-

derstanding of the Christian life, our freedom is not swallowed up or blurred or over-whelmed by Christ's authority. We see this very important theme all through *The Screwtape Letters*. The enemy writes of God: "He will not ravish, he will not cancel out this creature. He wants their free decision, their free choice." Christian faith is a "may," it is not a "must" in Lewis.

We see this in the novels, too. It means that our decisions are vital. Lewis is not in the vague theological world of universalism. For him, it's

terribly important that we make decisions, which means that we have a journey to discover who Aslan is. Notice that it's uniquely our discovery. When Shasta wanted to know about Aravis's scratches, Aslan said, "I tell no on any story but his own." We're all inquisitive, and we want to know everybody else's story. But we won't find it out from Aslan.

This is a New Testament theme too. Peter won't find out from Jesus what role John should play. "You follow me," Jesus says. That's just another way of saying that our freedom and uniqueness and dignity are preserved for us.

But our decisions are vital. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory is given a mission by Aslan, but Aslan does not command him to do the mission unless he agrees, and he does agree. In *The Silver Chair*, just after Jill has her encounter with Aslan, she also is given a mission. She is offered four things to remember as an assurance, and she accepts the mission.

The Christian life is an experience made up of a mixture of ups and downs. For Lewis, the Christian church moves through history in obedience and in disobedience, in understanding and misunderstanding what's been said to it. That's actually how Karl Barth described the Christian church, but C. S. Lewis could have said it, too.

Here I want to make an impor-

tant point about Lewis and his characters: There are no superheroes in Lewis's fiction. Every hero is flawed. If you've read only *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*, you might say, "Ah, but what about Lucy?" Lucy is about the closest to a superhero in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but by the time we get to *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, she too reveals her character flaws when she is too quick to write off friends who disappointed her. But just in time she hears the growl of Aslan. There is ambiguity, complexity, about every single character, and I respect this realism that we see in Lewis. His view of the Christian life, of Christian sanctification, is as growth in Christ taking time.

Lewis is in agreement with the apostle Paul's autobiographical statement in Romans 7. Every single character disappoints you in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In *The Screwtape Letters*, you see that Lewis feels that way about the people who make up the church. The "patient" comes to church immediately after becoming a Christian. As he walks into the church building and looks around he sees just that collection of neighbors he's been avoiding all week. Marvelous! We're a part of the Church as the body of Christ because Christ calls us here, not because we have so much in common with each other. No, we're all in trouble; we all live our life with ups and downs.

Here we see a related theme in Lewis's stories. The Christian life is lived alongside and in fellowship with other Christians. There are no Lone Rangers. Jill and Eustace in *The Silver Chair*, even with their earnest sincerity, don't pay much attention to detail. They can't even keep track of three of the four signs they were to remember. Then they meet a cranky character named Puddleglum. Puddleglum—the apparently negative, pessimistic, and in the end, beloved Puddleglum.

These unlikely co-workers need each other. Jill and Eustace are at first optimistic and enthusiastic—when they hear from a beautiful lady that

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there is to be a marvelous autumn fair and spring feast: "Come to the feast. You are special guests." What they don't know is that they're to be the feast.

It was Puddleglum the Marsh-wiggle who didn't want to go to that feast in the first place who objected. And they say, "Oh, you're so negative, a wet blanket on everything. Come on and enjoy yourself." But in the kitchen they discover from a talkative cook that they're on the menu. Jill and Eustace need Puddleglum because of his realism and, in the great temptation scene with the Emerald Queen, if it weren't for Puddleglum they would have all been in the gravest danger. He put his foot in the fire, and the bad smell of burnt Marsh-wiggle cleared their heads. They needed him. But Puddleglum needed them too.

The young prince Rilian has been lost for many years; and everyone knows he's lost; he's trapped somewhere. Puddleglum's been sitting by his fireplace; and he's never gone after him. He is gloomy and sad about the lost prince. It took Jill and Eustace to come along, impetuous enough to want to look for Prince Rilian. Because of them, Puddleglum becomes involved in the search. They don't know the dangers and

they're blundering into all kinds of dangers ahead. When they first meet the evil queen, they think she's beautiful. It took Puddleglum with his realism and his crankiness to keep Jill and Eustace balanced.

That's the Christian church. Lewis needed his brother, W. H. Lewis, and in a strange sort of way his dad, too. His father was a disappointment to him, but three of the most beautiful letters in the *Letters of C. S. Lewis* are letters he wrote to his brother when their father died, when he realized that even though his father had been in some ways absent for him, his father also made a great mark on his life. Lewis needed people. The Christian needs people: we need the church. That's a great theme in these stories.

The Chronicles of Narnia also teach us that although mission is crucial, it is not ultimate. That's an important theological concept to get hold of. Just as evil's power is strong but not ultimate, so our mission is crucial but not ultimate. Our sins don't do ultimate mischief. They don't destroy the story or the grand mission. Aslan is still able to cope. Digory and Polly are the biggest examples of failure in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In the deplorable world, horror of horrors, they ring the bell and start everything off in a bad direction. And then they bring Jadis into the innocent world of Narnia, almost as an Adam and Eve story. But, even that sin, ringing that bell—which they should never have done—even that is not the last word.

Our failures when they occur (and they do occur) are not the last word. The last word belongs to Aslan. Lewis saw that clearly. If you and I could get hold of this, it would set us free in our Christian discipleship. We have terribly important things to do in the world, and we shouldn't fail our task. But when we fail, our failures are not the last word.

Another central theme is that Aslan always keeps his own authority, even when we wish it were different. He keeps his authority even

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when it upsets us, as when Shasta wants to know why Aravis was scratched. I don't blame him for wanting to know: he's upset. As a matter of fact, during the chase scene he stood up and drove the lion back.

Shasta is a pretty tough kid when you get right down to it. And so he wanted to know why the lion scratched his girlfriend, whom he's going to marry later. But Aslan won't tell him. He wants to know it, but he doesn't need to know it, so therefore a distinction is drawn. Aslan doesn't always give us what we want, but he gives us what we need. The authority of Aslan is preserved. Even when we can't understand what's happening, his authority stands.

The most moving example is in the last of the novels, *The Last Battle*. It's the story in which everybody seems to lose. All the way through the story we're wondering, "When is Aslan going to come?" But the adventure becomes sadder and sadder because Aslan does not come.

The battle gets harder. The terror intensifies. The deception becomes more complete, but he doesn't come. Finally, death itself confronts us at the small doorway. And then we meet him, by surprise. He is there. At that marvelous scene, as Aslan surprises everyone, he calls in people we didn't expect to see. He surprises us all by calling in the stars. He's Lord of it all. He keeps his authority to the end and beyond. ■

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