

# Theological Themes in the *Chronicles of Narnia*

by Earl F. Palmer



New British Narnia Stamp

I want to consider C. S. Lewis as a 20th century theologian, because that's really what he was. The moment you say "I believe" or endeavor to explain to someone what you believe, you're in the business of doing theology. This is a large subject because Lewis wrote a great number of things, so I'm going to narrow the subject in two ways. First, I'll look only at the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Second, I'll concentrate on just four of many possible themes. Then, perhaps, these four themes will act like a case study of C. S. Lewis as a theologian.

## Evil

What is the first and most obvious discovery that any reader of the children's stories, the *Chronicles*

of *Narnia*, makes upon entering Narnia? The first theological theme confronts us almost immediately when Lucy and then Edmund and then finally Peter and Susan walk on the ground and feel the snow on their feet as they walk through that wardrobe. This first theme is a part of all the writings of Lewis: the reality of evil. In every book C. S. Lewis takes up the reality and meaning of evil. It's not portrayed as a formless, mindless force, or simply as human avarice or human anger or human wrath. Nor does Lewis see it as just natural disaster, like earthquakes and fire. Lewis accepts the Biblical portrayal of evil as a moral, cosmic, personal will against the will of God.

If I were going to do a Biblical

study on the devil in the Bible, Old and New Testaments, about the best definition I could come up with for the devil would be "cosmic (that is to say, spiritual), moral (not just natural, like earthquakes), personal will against the will of God." That's the devil, that's evil, as presented in the Old and New Testaments. C. S. Lewis picks up that same awareness when he portrays evil in his novels.

Now, what are some of the characteristics of evil as we see them portrayed by Lewis? In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and in *The Magician's Nephew*, the first image of evil is that of coldness. Isn't it interesting that Lewis has an image of coldness and ice to refer to the devil whereas we think of the

devil with fire? Then a classicist friend reminded me, "But even in Dante the devil is encased in ice." So perhaps Lewis got that image of coldness from Dante. In *The Magician's Nephew* the deplorable world is cold, and in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when we first come into Narnia, we learn that for many, many years it has been winter without Christmas, and everything is cold.

Now, we've got to think about that coldness because it makes things work well. Sleighs work very well on the cold snow, and the White Witch gets around very nicely with her sledge while it's cold.

A second way in which evil is portrayed by Lewis in the novels is as a tempter. Evil tempts by deception in *The Silver Chair*, that incredible scene when the Emerald Queen tries to tempt the children and Puddleglum, making them think that what they saw as the real sun is not the sun, that this light bulb she holds is the real sun. She tempts them by that deception.

In *The Last Battle*, of course, we have the most blatant temptation—where the donkey Puzzle has a lion's skin put over him and we have a false Christ, a false Aslan, that the people are to bow to and to worship.

Evil tempts with desire. That's the first temptation in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when the wicked White Queen tempts Edmund with Turkish Delight. It's interesting that he gets a taste of it but never gets any more. He gets only a bread crust. It's like, I've been told, in heroin addiction; there's one great high and from then on it's just to kill pain. We see a little of the same dynamics in Lewis's portrayal of the temptation with desire. He has a line to that effect in *The Screwtape Letters*: "an ever increasing appetite for an ever decreasing pleasure." We see it acted out in the relationship of Jadis, the White Queen, and Edmund. One taste of Turkish Delight, the promise of a box of Turkish Delight—but he never gets it.

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Then there's the temptation to virtue. As you know if you've read Lewis, that's one of the temptations he speaks of most in *The Screwtape Letters*. The temptation to virtue is perhaps the most sinister of all. You see that in *The Magician's Nephew* when Digory is tempted by, in this case, Jadis: if he'll take the apple, it will help his mother get well, whereas he is supposed to take the apple to Aslan. But the Witch says, "If you'll take the apple, it will cure your mother." That's virtue. So we see these temptations as another part of Lewis's portrayal of evil.

Evil is also portrayed as the destroyer. We meet that in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when Lucy comes back to Mr. Tumnus's house and finds that it's been destroyed. Of course, in the most terrifying sense we meet the destroyer in Tash. By the way, not all the evil figures in the *Chronicles* are women. Tash is the figure of evil in *The Last Battle*, and this hideous monster also destroys.

Evil is also portrayed as the one with whom we must battle. We see this in *Perelandra*, in the deadly battle between Ransom and Weston: this incredible good/bad struggle down into the nethermost parts of the earth—and finally the victory of Ransom. We also see it in *That Hideous Strength*, another one of Lewis's adult novels, in the battle

between the Head, between that hideous strength and good. It pre-occupies totally *The Last Battle*, which was the last of the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Finally, evil is portrayed as powerful, but not ultimately powerful. This is important if we are to understand the theology of Lewis. There's a cumulative power and growth of power in, for instance, *That Hideous Strength*. The power of evil gets stronger over Mark, a young scientist who gets more and more under the control of evil. It's terrifying to see how in little, single steps evil gathers momentum. Believe me, that novel is frightening.

Every student who goes to a university, every professor who's in a university complex, or every businessman who's ever worked for a great research institute, should read *That Hideous Strength*. The cumulative buildup of the power of evil by small, individual steps—that's portrayed by Lewis. But, ultimately, evil suffers from its own inner collapse. That's what happens to evil, and it's also the Biblical analysis of evil. Though evil is powerful, Aslan is more powerful. And evil is judged. It's judged in *The Last Battle*. It's judged all the way through the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Rabadash is judged, judged redemptively, but judged. Finally, in *The Last Battle*, evil is defeated.

My wife is working on how to read Lewis's novels aloud, and one of the things she's taking up is why we should read fantasy. In connection with this she got the book by Bruno Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment*. The subtitle is *The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. He says that children who are deprived of healthy fantasy, like these stories I've just been referring to, then instinctively turn to fantasy but have no models from which to work, and therefore cannot resolve their feelings as well as if they had models in good healthy literary fantasy.

Bettelheim is very much in favor of literary fantasy like C. S. Lewis's novels. He tells a story of a mother who always cut off or, in effect, interrupted any kind of tragedy that



she ran across in novels for fear they would upset or hurt her child. One day she was reading *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which has a very frightening scene at the end. She was reading along and she looked ahead. (You know how parents do that—when you're reading, you look ahead and see what's happening a little ahead; and then you think, How can I anesthetize that?)

So she saw all the terrible things that were going to happen to the witch and she cut it off and just said, "And Snow White married the Prince, and they lived happily ever after, and everything was fine." But the daughter said to her, "Well, what about the witch? Doesn't she . . . doesn't a shoe burn her up or doesn't she fall over a cliff?"

Bettelheim says, You see, that mother, by trying to soften that sense of tragedy in the end with the witch, did no favor to her daughter. Then he makes a comment: "If a child doesn't see that evil is punished, he lives in an unsafe world." If evil is not punished, if there isn't justice, then we live in a very unsafe world. So the mother's attempt to make it softer and kinder didn't square with reality. The wicked witch has to be judged. When the mother took that judgment element out, she terrorized her daughter more, according to Bettelheim, than had she left it in.

This judgment element must be present in great fantasy literature. It's present in Lewis. The devil, evil, is powerful but not ultimately powerful.

### Good

Lewis also believes in the existence of ultimate good, and that's another major theme in all of his writings. The sense of ultimate good is present in his "space trilogy," *Perelandra*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, and *That Hideous Strength*—his adult novels. He wrote those first. That sense of good is present in the space trilogy, but in a profoundly hidden sense, very much the same as in J. R. R. Tolkien's marvelous trilogy, *The Lord of the*



*Rings*, where the ultimate good is also hidden.

In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, which Lewis wrote after the space trilogy, he broke new ground. He decided to dare to portray the full circle, to show ultimate good as really knowable, knowable by mere men and women, boys and girls. He still preserves the hiddenness and the mysterious element of ultimate good, but he dares to do what Tolkien did not dare to do: he dares to portray good in knowable, personal terms, yet preserving the mystery and the wonder. Good becomes specific and concrete in the great lion, Aslan.

I love the description of Aslan in *The Silver Chair*. Here's his description 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. [The Lion speaks to her, as you know, in that scene. That's a great theophany, one of several theophanies in the *Chronicles of Narnia*.]

"'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. [Jill is terribly thirsty.] 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.'

"They were the first words she had heard since Scrubb had spoken to her on the edge of the cliff. For a second she stared here and there, wondering who had spoken. Then the voice said again, [See how specific and direct. The voice spoke again.] 'If you are thirsty, come and drink,' and of course she remembered what Scrubb had said about animals talking in this other world, and realized that it was the lion speaking. Anyway, she had seen its lips move this time, and the voice was not like a man's. It was deeper, wilder, and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice. It did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in rather a different way."

That's Aslan. That's ultimate good in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Aslan is the great Jesus Christ figure in that novel. He is God. He is the "son of the Emperor over the Sea"—that's how he is described.

I want you to notice how we meet ultimate good in the novels of Lewis. First, we are unaware that a meeting is to take place. Here's the mysterious element always preserved by Lewis. Aslan calls the people into Narnia and there's always a sense of surprise and of wonder and excitement when they meet him.

Then he is met first through the words of others about him. Just like we meet Christ, by words about him first. The Holy Scriptures are words about Christ. Somebody tells us about him. Remember in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Mr. Beaver and Mrs. Beaver tell the children about him, and it slips out that Aslan's a lion. Who would want to meet a lion?

"Is he—quite safe?" Susan says. Next 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 they meet him first through what others say about him.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* they meet him by signs that they miss at first. It's one of the subtle touches in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, that there are signs about Aslan but the people miss them. Everybody misses the first sign, the lamp-post, until we read *The Magician's Nephew*. Who in the world could figure out the lamp-post, until five novels later you realize why the lamp-post is there. (If you haven't read that far, I won't spoil it for you.) The lamp-post is a sign of evil, and also it's a sign of good. Many signs are both.

The second sign in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is the mysterious thaw. The slush and the mud are signs that Aslan is moving in the East. When he's moving, the sledge has a terrible time moving, because the winter begins to thaw into mud and slush and guck. But that's a sign that Aslan's there. So he's uncomfortable to have around. He was then. He was in the New Testament. He still is. But that's a sign—the thaw.

Then, of course, in the most definitive way—and this is the profound part theologically—we discover who Aslan is by what he does. Here C. S. Lewis is like Karl Barth. Barth says you cannot divide the words of Jesus from the work of Jesus. They're inseparable. Lewis says the same thing: the words and the work are inseparable. We finally meet and know Aslan by what he does in creation. That's in *The Magician's Nephew*.

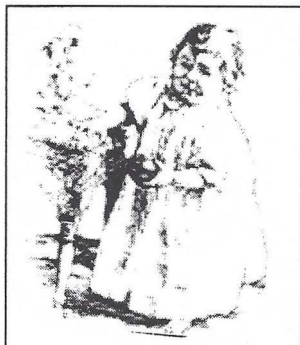
I love Lewis's definition of creation: Aslan sings; and while he sings, the world came into being. That's C. S. Lewis's definition of "God said, 'Let there be light.'" Lewis just changes it a little. Aslan walks around and sings.

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

Notice in Lewis's novels that the

## A Brief Introduction to

### C. S. Lewis



Clive Staples Lewis ("Jack") was born in 1898 and he died on November 23, 1963, just before his 65th birthday. As a boy of 15, Lewis decided he was an atheist, although he grew up in a Northern Irish Presbyterian home.

But Jack Lewis could not seem to avoid Christians and as a young scholar at Oxford he sought them out as friends, he argued with them, and finally he realized that his atheism was fading away and he reluctantly decided that he believed in God. He was then a theist but the young man could not make sense to his own mind of what stood at the center of Christianity.

What was he to do with the New Testament insistence that God had spoken for himself in his only son, Jesus Christ (John 1:1-18)? Lewis on an evening in September of 1931 walked with two friends, Hugo Dyson and J. R. R. Tolkien, on the Deer Park Addison's Walk pathway of Magdalen College in Oxford. He and his friends talked together until 3 a.m. that night. The next day, as Lewis tells it, "I rode with my brother to Whipsnade Zoo in the side car of his motorcycle. At the beginning of the ride I did not believe in the deity of Jesus Christ; at the end of the ride I did. Nothing happened during the ride but the long talk with Dyson and Tolkien the night before had much to do with it."

C. S. Lewis on that day in 1931 trusted in Jesus Christ. He would go on to write books as a literary scholar and also books about Christian faith. He wrote novels, poems, and children's stories. His writings became so popular that 80 million copies of books written by C. S. Lewis have been published in this century—making this English scholar the most published single writer of the 20th century.

—Earl F. Palmer



act of redemption is never repeated. Aslan dies once; he doesn't die over and over again. From then on, everything builds on that great redemption. A little later Eustace is a dragon and has a terrible need to be de-dragoned, and it turns out that Aslan de-dragons him. Only Aslan can do it. So again, by what he does, we learn what redemption is.

There is hardly a more poignant and powerful portrayal of redemption than that scene where Eustace is telling Edmund—Edmund should understand: he was a traitor, too—what it was like. He said, "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, 'Lie down.' 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 water." There isn't a word spoken. Aslan didn't say, "You're all right now." Instead, he does something.

That's very Biblical. Jesus Christ died for us. What ultimate good says and does in the Bible is now the same thing in Lewis's theology. Redemption by Aslan is not a word spoken but an event that occurs.

Finally, we discover who Aslan is by his companionship. Here I want to read you a quotation from my favorite novel, *The Horse and His Boy*.

"And being very tired and having nothing inside him, he felt so sorry for himself that the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"What put a stop to all this was a sudden fright. Shasta discovered that someone or somebody was walking beside him. It was pitch dark and he could see nothing.



Pauline Baynes

And the Thing (or Person) was going so quietly that he could hardly hear any footfalls. What he could hear was breathing. His invisible companion seemed to breathe on a very large scale, and Shasta got the impression that it was a very large creature. And he had come to notice this breathing so gradually that he had really no idea how long it had been there. It was a horrible shock.

"It darted into his mind that he had heard long ago that there were giants in these Northern countries. [You know Shasta is superstitious, worried about tombs and death and giants in Narnia.] He bit his lip in terror. But now that he really had something to cry about, he stopped crying. [Lewis knows a lot about human personality.]

"The Thing (unless it was a Person) went on beside him so very quietly that Shasta began to hope he had only imagined it. But just as he was becoming quite sure of it, [Lewis throws this in for the intellectuals who do this all their lives, trying to imagine everything away. We're going to analyze the terror now and take it away from us. Just about the time they've analyzed it—"It's probably only a little superstition here . . . Maybe it's the way the wind is blowing I know in the mountains sometimes you get

little warm winds..."] there suddenly came a deep, rich sigh out of the darkness beside him. That couldn't be imagination. Anyway, he had felt the hot breath of that sigh on his chilly left hand.

"If the horse had been any good—or if he had known how to get any good out of the horse—he would have risked everything on a break away and a wild gallop. But he knew he couldn't make the horse gallop. So he went on at a walking pace and the unseen companion walked and breathed beside him. At last he could bear it no longer. [We see the growing crescendo of this encounter.]

"'Who are you?' he said, scarcely above a whisper. [What a great question! It's *the* question, isn't it? It comes out of a little boy, just like it can come out of a great intellectual—"Who are you?" And the answer is profound.]

"'One who has waited long for you to speak.' [One thing that is marvelous in Lewis is that he never has Aslan crowd or push in, or destroy the freedom of any of his servants. As he says in *Screwtape Letters*, God wants to have his cake and eat it too. He woos, he never ravishes, he never cancels out our freedom. We see that here.] 'One who has waited long for you to speak,' said the Thing. Its voice was not loud, but very large and deep.

"'Are you—are you a giant?' asked Shasta.

"'You might call me a giant,' said the Large Voice. 'But I am not like the creatures you call giants.' [That is profound on Lewis's part; notice how Aslan does not criticize the theology of Shasta. It's good for us to learn this. Aslan is willing to accept Shasta's words. He says, 'I'm a giant; yes, you might call me that, but not like you think.' He preserves his own mystery, too.]

"'I can't see you at all,' said Shasta, after staring very hard. Then (for an even more terrible idea had come into his head) he said, almost in a scream, 'You're not—not something *dead*, are you? Oh please—please do go away. What harm have I ever done you?

Oh, I am the unluckiest person in the whole world.'

"Once more he felt the warm breath of the Thing on his hand and face. 'There,' it said, 'that is not the breath of a ghost. Tell me your sorrows.'

"Shasta was a little reassured by the breath, so he told how he had never known his real father or mother and had been brought up sternly by the fisherman. He told the story of his escape and how they were chased by lions and forced to swim for their lives; and of all their dangers in Tashbaan and about his night among the Tombs and how the beasts howled at him out of the desert. And he told about the heat and thirst of their desert journey and how they were almost at their goal when another lion chased them and wounded Aravis. And also, how very long it was since he had had anything to eat. [I'm glad Lewis doesn't spiritualize all this. He throws that in just like the parable of the prodigal son who was hungry.]

"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—" [And here Aslan interrupts him.]

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

"I was the lion.' And as Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the 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. [Notice how Aslan is able to get down to our size, down to where we are.] 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. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight to re-

*Evil's power  
is strong but  
not ultimate;  
our mission  
is crucial but  
not ultimate.*

ceive you.'

"Then it was you who wounded Aravis?'

"It was I.' [Aslan always tells the truth.]

"But what for?' [Here comes a great line that is repeated several times in the *Chronicles of Narnia*.]

"Child,' said the Voice, 'I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own.' [That's straight out of the New Testament. In the last chapter of John, Peter when he sees John over there says, "What about that disciple?" And Jesus says, "Peter, you follow me. I'll take care of John."]

"Who are you?' asked Shasta.

"Myself,' said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook: and again 'Myself,' loud and clear and gay; and then the third time, 'Myself,' whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all round you as if the leaves rustled with it."

That's Aslan. That's Aslan, who makes himself known. C. S. Lewis has broken new ground. He has dared to portray ultimate good as knowable.

#### Faith

A third major theme in C. S. Lewis might be described as the "dynamics of discovery" involving the faith-and-grace tension in Lewis's novels: the dynamics of

faith. In Lewis's novels our freedom and our doubt are never either ridiculed or ignored. In every case, faith develops by gradual steps. We see this in Shasta.

That same sort of dynamic appears in all the characters. It's most pointed in *Prince Caspian*, that they gradually begin to see Aslan. It takes time. It takes a thousand single steps to become a Christian. Lewis knew it from his own life and it is portrayed in his novels.

Also, Lewis points up in every case the role that others play in aiding us. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, it's that cranky, funny-looking old professor. And when we get to *The Magician's Nephew*, we get a surprise when we discover who that old professor is. He plays a role.

I have often thought that if I were ever to teach a course on evangelism, one of the most beautiful portrayals I know of an evangelist is the professor and the way he relates to those children. He knows that Aslan has to prove himself, but he also helps the children. But, of course, in all the novels, Aslan himself is the one who must assure us and must qualify us. In *The Last Battle*, it's Aslan who finally calls them 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 it takes time. It's a gradual, growing discovery of who Aslan is.

#### Discipleship

A fourth major theme is what I'm going to call the "way of discipleship" teaching in C. S. Lewis's fiction. You might call this the Christian life teaching. Notice what we've observed so far: his teaching about evil, his teaching about ultimate good, his teaching about faith, and now his teaching about the implications of it all.

What does it mean to follow Aslan? In Lewis's understanding of the Christian life, our freedom is not swallowed up and blurred and overwhelmed, squelched by Christ's authority. We see this  
(Continued on p. 24)



(Narnia continued)

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 no universalist. For him, it's important that we each make decisions, that we have a journey and make a discovery of who Aslan is. And notice, it's uniquely our discovery. When Shasta wanted to know about Aravis's scratches, Aslan said, "I tell no one any story but his own." That's frustrating, isn't it? We're all snoopy, and we want to know everybody else's story. Well, we won't find it out from Aslan. We won't find it out from Christ. "You follow me," he says. That's just another way of saying that our freedom and uniqueness and dignity are preserved for us. It means that our decisions are important.

In *The Magician's Nephew*, for instance, Digory is given a mission by Aslan, but Aslan does not command him to do the mission unless Digory agrees to go, and he does agree to go. In *The Silver Chair*, just after Jill has her great encounter with Aslan, she also is given a mission: she's given four things to remember, but she accepts the mission. Now, this brings us to another point: the result of faith is obligation, responsibility. As soon as Jill experiences her relationship with Aslan she is given a responsibility.

Further, the Christian life is a dynamic experience made up of a mixture of ups and downs. In other words, for Lewis, the Christian church moves through history in obedience and in disobedience. In understanding and in misunderstanding of what's been said to it. That's actually a quotation from Karl Barth, but C. S. Lewis could have said it too.

I want to make an important point here about Lewis and his characters. There are no superheroes in Lewis's fiction. Every hero is flawed. Now, if you've read only

*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*, you're going to say, "Ah, but what about Lucy?" Lucy is about the closest thing to a superhero there is in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, but by the time we get to *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, she falls, too. She falls by being snoopy. Remember? Also she falls by falling victim to power. She wants power. It seems to be the thing that hurts more Christians' piety than anything else, the desire for power. It hits Lucy, and she hears the growl of Aslan.

There's an ambiguity, a complexity, about every single character. I love this realism that we see in Lewis. His view of the Christian life, of Christian sanctification, is a growth in Christ. But Lewis is in 100 percent agreement with Paul in his autobiographical statement of Romans 7. Every single character disappoints us in the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

If you've read *The Screwtape Letters*, you know that Lewis feels that way about the church. He has the "patient" come to church right after becoming a Christian. He walks in the church, looks around, and sees just that collection of neighbors that he's been avoiding all week. Marvellous! We're here because Christ calls us here, not because we have so much in common with each other, and we like each other and we're all so nice and perfect. No, we're all in trouble in a sense; we're all with ups and downs on our journey. And all the characters in Lewis's novels are flawed.

Now another insight: the Christian life is lived alongside and in fellowship with other Christians.

There are no Lone Rangers. Take, for instance, Jill and Eustace in *The Silver Chair* with their enthusiasm and excitement. They don't pay much attention to detail; they can't even keep track of those four signs; that's all they had to remember—just to read the Bible every day—and they forgot that. Then they meet a character named Puddleglum. Puddleglum, negative, pessimistic, cantankerous, beloved Puddleglum. Someone said that Lewis modeled him after his gardener. He's so pessimistic. But, you know, they need each other.

Jill and Eustace are so optimistic and enthusiastic—they hear from a beautiful lady that there's going to be a marvelous autumn fair and spring feed: "Come to the feast. You are special guests." What they don't know is that they're to be the feast. And Puddleglum (he's the Marsh-wiggle) is basically pessimistic; he didn't want to go to that feast in the first place. They say, "Ah, you're so cranky all the time, you put a wet blanket on everything. Come on and enjoy yourself." Then they get in the kitchen and discover from a talkative cook that they're on the menu—and fortunately, they get out of that situation.

But, they need Puddleglum; Jill and Eustace need Puddleglum because of his realism and, as you know, in that great temptation with the wicked Emerald Queen, if it weren't for Puddleglum they would have all been lost. He put his foot in the fire, and the terrible smell of burnt Marsh-wiggle cleared everybody's head.

But Puddleglum needed them,

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## Lewis Indexed

Someone you're talking to has raised a difficult theological question. You know that C. S. Lewis had a great answer to this question but you can't remember which of his books it was in. Or, you're writing a movie review and know that Lewis said something about heaven that you'd like to use but you need to find the direct quote. We recommend: *The C. S. Lewis Index*, compiled by Janine Goffar, Crossway Books: 1998.

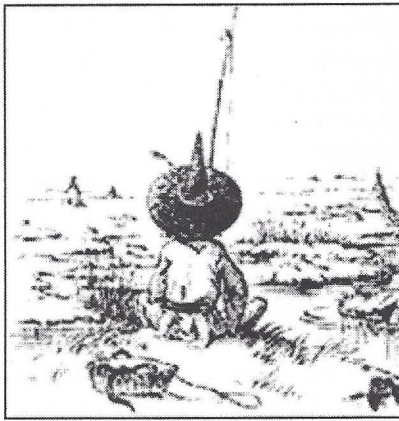
too. That young prince has been lost for many years. Everyone knows he's lost; he's trapped somewhere. Puddleglum's been sitting by his fireplace; he's never gone after him. He's so pessimistic and gloomy, he'd never leave his fireplace to go to look for Prince Rilian. It took Jill and Eustace to come along, buoyant and optimistic enough to go look for Prince Rilian.

They don't know the dangers and they're blundering into all of them. 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.

It's like Lewis needed his brother, W. H. Lewis. And in a strange sort of way he needed his dad, too. He never got along much with his dad: his dad was a disappointment to him, but the most beautiful letters in the *Letters of C. S. Lewis* are letters he wrote to his brother after the death of his father—when he realized that even though his father had been such a disappointment to them, yet his father also made a great mark in his life. Lewis needed people. The Christian needs people: the Christian church. That's a great theme in the *Chronicles*.

Our role is the mission given to us by Aslan, and in the *Chronicles of Narnia* our mission is crucial, but it is not ultimate. That is an important theological concept to get hold of. In other words, evil's power is strong but not ultimate; our mission is crucial but not ultimate. Our sins don't do ultimate mischief. When they lose track of the signs, it doesn't destroy the mission. Aslan is still able to cope with them.

Digory and Polly are the biggest examples of failure of the disciples, of the children in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. That's in the deplorable world when, horror of horrors, they ring the bell and start everything off. They ring the bell and everything falls. That's the beginning of evil, and then they bring Jadis into the nice world of Narnia. That's sort of the Adam and Eve. But even that sin, ringing that terri-



ble 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 important things to do in the world, and we should not fail our task. But when we fail, it's not the end of the world.

Now, a final insight about the Christian life is that throughout the *Chronicles of Narnia* Aslan always keeps his own authority. He keeps his authority even when we wish it were different. He keeps his authority even when it upsets us, as when Shasta wants to know why Aravis got scratched.

I don't blame Aslan for wanting to know: he's kind of mad. As a matter of fact, he stood up and chased that lion away. Shasta's a pretty tough kid when you get right down to it. So he wanted to know why Aslan scratched his girlfriend, whom he's going to marry later. But Aslan will not tell him. He wants to know it, but he doesn't need to know it.

We have this distinction drawn. Aslan doesn't always give us what we want, but he gives us what we need—so that the authority of Aslan is preserved. And second, even when we can't understand what's happening, his authority stands.

The most moving example of this is in the last of the novels, *The Last Battle*. That's the one novel where everybody loses the war. All

the way through the novel we're wondering: "When is Aslan going to come?" It gets sadder and sadder in *The Last Battle* because Aslan does not come. The battle gets harder. The terror gets worse. The deception gets more terrifying. And finally, death. And then we meet him, by surprise. He's there. We have that marvelous scene as Aslan surprises everyone through that little door, and 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.

When I meet anybody who hasn't read the *Chronicles of Narnia*, I always feel jealous. My close friend, Frank Andersen, told me that when they read the last *Chronicle of Narnia*, "the whole family wept." For two reasons: they wept because of the story, and they wept because there were no more *Chronicles of Narnia*.

I have one last quotation. It's from C. S. Lewis, written just a year before he died, to a person who asked him why he wrote children's stories. He said, "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 certainly modified my habits of composition. Thus (1) it imposed strict limits on my vocabulary; (2) it excluded erotic love; (3) it cut down reflective and analytical passages; (4) it led me to produce chapters of nearly equal length for convenience in reading aloud. [See, he knew they were to be read aloud.] All these restrictions did me great good."

And they've done us a lot of good, too. ■

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