Surrounded!
“C. S. LEWIS: SURPRISED BY JOY!”

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John 16:19-22

Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’? Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

Matthew 13:44

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

“Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. This story is about something that happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids. They were sent to the house of an old Professor who lived in the heart of the country, ten miles from the nearest railway station and two miles from the nearest post office.”

Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy soon realize that they have a lot of freedom due to the lack of supervision and decide to play a game of hide and seek in the house. All throughout the house there are unused rooms and passages that take them to places they had not known about. While playing this game, Lucy hides in one of the forbidden rooms, which had nothing but a large figure with a sheet over it. Lucy takes off the sheet to find a beautiful wardrobe laying there in front of her. She decides to hide inside and when she opens it and goes in, she finds something beyond her imagination. “A moment later she found that she was standing in the middle of a wood at night-time with snow under her feet and snowflakes falling though the air.”

So begins C. S. Lewis’s classic children’s book, The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe. And it is also a parable of Lewis’ own entry into the Christian faith. These children discover a frozen world called Narnia, under the power of the “White Witch” who has put a spell on Narnia to
make it always winter, and never Christmas. There the children meet the great Lion, Aslan, who frees the world from its frozen spell, returning it to spring and new life. The White Witch hears of this, and she is furious. She summons her own army of giants, ogres and other vile creatures. Soon a brutal war breaks out between Aslan and the White Witch. And the great adventure is on.

Let me ask a question: “How many are familiar with C. S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*?” Sixty-five years ago, C. S. Lewis created this land of wonder and enchantment, and since then, over 60 million readers have fallen through that wardrobe door into the wondrous world that exists beyond in the back. The Christian witness confronting us today is Clive Staples Lewis, known to his friends as Jack. I am not alone in considering C. S. Lewis to be the greatest Christian apologist of the 20th century. That is, he was a defender and interpreter of Christ to the modern world. In this respect, he was perhaps a more effective evangelist than even Billy Graham.

Lewis was a great author who taught English literature in standing-room-only lecture halls at both Oxford and Cambridge University. Lewis believed that the Word of God is best communicated by the power of the written word. This is how he put it:

> Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, literature irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.

Thus literature was Lewis’ tool. In the history of Christendom, never has one man bridged so many levels of understanding to the story of Christianity. For the child at heart he created the land of Narnia and the untamed lion/savior, Aslan. For science fiction readers he traveled to Perelandra with Ransom. For the philosopher and theologian he reasoned about problem of pain and the reality of miracles, as well as debating doctrines of Christianity. For the pain stricken he observed grief and spoke of prayer. For those concerned with the afterlife he wrote about Heaven and Hell and exposed the mind of Satan. For those who were questioning and struggling, for hours every day he wrote letters of personal encouragement and advice.

From 1936 to 1963 he published about one million words of high-powered literary criticism; another million words of “imaginative literature;” and yet another million words explaining and defending his Christian faith. Fifty-three years after his death, his influence remains strong, and he is adored equally by Catholics, traditional Anglicans, main-stream Protestants, Evangelicals, Eastern Orthodox and Pentecostalists. More Mormons read C. S. Lewis than any other non-Mormon writer. Maybe someday we’ll get around to a sermon series using his works. But for this one day, I will only tell you some of the lessons I’ve learned from his life.

First, C. S. Lewis embodies for me the workings of God’s grace – especially of that grace we call “prevenient grace” which prepares the way for us to return to God. The most amazing thing, to me, is that these marvelous writings might never have happened, had it not been for the relentless grace of God. At age nine, the joy in Jack Lewis’s life was taken away when his mother died. His father was incapable of understanding his brilliant child and sent him away, at that tender age, to a variety of schools, eventually winning a scholarship to Oxford. During those difficult school years, Lewis became a convinced atheist and remained so until he was 31 years old.
However, Lewis did not count on how persistent God is. In his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, he writes “I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading.... God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous.” Lewis didn’t want to be a Christian. He was trained to be a hard-headed rationalist. But the more he looked into Christianity, the more sense it made. In fact, he found more philosophical challenges with unbelief. God was working on him. Lewis found himself desperately empty, and nothing could satisfy his soul. He quoted the words of Francis Thompson’s *Hound of Heaven*:

I fled Him down the nights and down the days, I fled Him down the arches of the years, I fled Him down the labyrinth ways of mine own mind only to surrender on the top of a London bus with the conviction that “God was God and Jesus is Christ.”

He found that as long as he attempted to find happiness in this world, the more miserable he became.

God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from God’s self, because it is not there. There is no such thing (as happiness apart from God). I gave in, and admitted that God was God.

His friends, such as J. R. R. Tolkien, engaged him in long discussions about the Christian faith. Lewis may have turned from God, but God had not turned from Lewis. And Lewis discovered that no one is beyond God’s reach, not even those who reject God. In the end, Lewis believed that even evil itself will be swallowed up by God’s grace. One of my favorite Lewis books, *The Great Divorce*, is about the gulf between heaven and earth, and in it even the most wicked still have the possibility of redemption – even in the “after-life” Lewis portrays God as continuing to pursue even the most wicked. They simply need to turn from themselves and turn toward God. Those who turn toward God are on the road to redemption. Those who remain focused on themselves, become increasingly smaller, until all of hell is but a crack in heaven’s sidewalk. God never shuts the door of grace. We alone can lock God out.

The passage we read from Matthew tells of a treasure hidden in a field, which we stumble upon and, in our joy, realizing what we’ve found, we’re willing to sell everything we have in order to own it. C. S. Lewis fell through the wardrobe door of faith, dragged, he said, “kicking and screaming.” And there, by God’s grace, he found his joy.

Secondly, one of the deepest lessons I’ve learned from C. S. Lewis that even pain is a tool of God’s love. Lewis was unafraid of dealing with the most difficult issues, and chief among them is what Lewis called “the problem of pain.” He wrote a book by this name, *The Problem of Pain*, in which he attempts to answer the universal question, “Why would an all-loving, all-knowing God allow people to experience pain and suffering?”

This great Christian apologist believed that pain is a problem because our finite, human minds selfishly believe that pain-free lives would prove that God loves us. By asking for pain-free lives, he contends, we want God to love us less, not more. Watch this. For what Lewis says is radical –
and Biblical. Lewis believed that love endures suffering because suffering brings us closer to God’s love. “The real problem,” he wrote, “is not why some pious, humble, believing people suffer, but why some do not.”

Lewis thought long on what Jesus said about pain. We heard it from John’s Gospel: “So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” Lewis believed that suffering is essential. It shapes our souls. It produces patience, it grow faith – and it brings us closer to God’s love.

So C. S. Lewis challenges how we understand our afflictions. The answer to the problem of pain is that we are works in progress, being made lovable by a God who loves us even when we are not yet lovable. Says Lewis:

God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

In fact, Lewis does not believe we can escape pain without forfeiting our free will. Lewis writes:

Grief exists because love exists. People die premature deaths because they must if we are to exist in a world where free will is possible. Anything else would be a controlled experiment, a massive fraud where we are not free to love God, but are robots predetermined to do so. (Without free will) we, in essence, would be pointless.

C. S. Lewis knew pain and grief. For many years he devotedly cared for his brother through depressing days of illness and addiction. In the last decade of his life, he found love in his marriage to Joy Davidman Gresham. Despite their very different upbringing and experiences of life, their lives on different continents, he found a soul mate, a fellow thinker and writer, in Joy. His Joy, however, died a painful and untimely death. In A Grief Observed, written after Joy’s death, Lewis bared his soul, showing all the hurt that such a tragedy can bring. But it also increased his love and brought him peace, and a sense of thanksgiving for her loving fellowship in the faith, and the quiet hope of a joyful reunion in the heavenly places. Pain, Lewis believed, has a purpose – a divine purpose: it matures our souls, increases our love, and causes us to trust in God more completely.

So the third lesson I learn from C. S. Lewis is that when we follow Christ, we are changed. The presence of Christ within us changes us from the inside out, transforming our values, compelling us to mature in ways we absolutely do not wish to change. Nowhere is this more clear, Lewis said, than with our resources and money. This, he said, is where faith is truly tested. He wrestled with this:

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, 1 out of every 6 verses deals with money. Of the 29 parables Christ told, 16 deal with a person and his money. I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.
Lewis did not want to change, but he said his transformation was as if an “icicle was melting within me.” And he said of his possessions: “Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours.”

All of this was part of being surrendered to God. He said there is no “part way” with God. We are either completely surrendered to God – or we are not. We deceive ourselves if we think we can partially surrender, or “just a little” bit give to God. He put it this way:

There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, “All right, then, have it your way.”

So Lewis believed in the absolute sovereignty of God. We cannot be half-Christian, half-disciples, half-surrendered. In matters of trusting God, with all we are and all we have, there is no half-way path. We view this surrender with dread. But what we find is that we are surprised by a joy that never will end.

Final lesson: I love it that C. S. Lewis was an unabashed evangelist, but that most people don’t recognize it. He had a grand vision of God’s infinite love and was unafraid of imaginatively communicating that vision. Lewis intended his writings to be a doorway into the wardrobe of faith.

It is no surprise, then, that the stories of Narnia and Aslan are a direct stepping-stone to Christ. In his book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the great mysterious Lion, Aslan, reveals that he is known in our world by another name. So an 11-year-old fan, by the name of Hila, wrote to Lewis, asking Aslan’s name in this world. Lewis wrote back:

As to Aslan’s other name, well, I want you to guess. Has there been anyone in this world who: (1) arrived at the same time as Father Christmas; (2) said he was the son of a great emperor; (3) gave himself up for someone else’s fault to be jeered and killed by wicked people; (4) came to life again; (5) is sometimes spoken of as a Lamb. Don’t you really know His name in this world? Think it over – and let me know your answer.

I believe we all know that answer. For C. S. Lewis, it was the source of joy he had reluctantly discovered. Once he stumbled upon this treasure, he was willing to give up anything in his life in order to hold onto it. And he wished the world to know that this treasure, Jesus Christ, is the only true joy we can find.

The life and writings of C. S. Lewis are a challenge to us and to our world today. And today we are charged to think on the questions C. S. Lewis is asking. Have you discovered the immensity of God’s grace which not only calls you home but is out in the fields searching for you? Have you the eyes of faith that show you that suffering and pain are tools in God’s hands to perfect your soul? And have you, you personally, fallen into the “wardrobe,” stumbling upon that immortal joy for which you would give everything in your life and still count it a bargain? Jack Lewis would have you know that even now, every one of us can be surprised by this joy.
“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” such as that of Clive Staples Lewis, “let us also lay aside every weight...and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”

May we pray? Lord God, in you alone is joy. Like a child, we puzzle over the clues before us, wondering how to put them together. Help us to see that it is your light alone which is true, and that by your light we can see all things for what they truly are. May we know you are real, O God, and that because you exist, everything in this world is different. Give us eyes of faith that we might walk in confidence and faith through the darkest valleys. And knowing that our home is not here, but with you, help us not to fear going home. In Christ’s name. Amen.

2. Hebrews 12:1