



FELLOWSHIP FOR PERFORMING ARTS



The Most Reluctant Convert:

The Untold Story of C. S. Lewis

DISCUSSION GUIDE

BY DEVIN BROWN | ART BY GALINA GUBCHENKO

1. “When I was an atheist...”

These are Lewis’ first words in the film. Clive Staples Lewis was born in 1898 and died, a week before his 65th birthday, on November 22, 1963. From the time he was fourteen until his early thirties, Lewis was an atheist, someone who does not believe in God. He was also a *materialist*, someone who believes that nothing exists besides physical matter.

In the 1940s, Lewis gave a series of talks on the BBC that later became one of his most famous books, *Mere Christianity*. Before the second set of talks, Lewis told his radio audience:

It’s not because I’m anybody in particular that I’ve been asked to tell you what Christians believe. In fact it’s just the opposite. They have asked me, first of all because I’m a layman and not a parson, and consequently they thought I might understand the ordinary person’s point of view a bit better. Secondly, I think they asked me because it was known that I’d been an atheist for many years and only became a Christian fairly recently. They thought that would mean I’d be able to see the difficulties – able to remember what Christianity looks like from the outside.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Lewis was a recent convert. What are some things a recent convert might be able to see that a lifelong Christian might not?

LOOK DEEPER

Lewis knew what Christianity looked like from the outside and he knew *what atheism looked like from the inside*. How might this be helpful as well in sharing the Gospel?

2. “Look at the universe we live in.”

The film opens in Oxford’s Museum of Natural History. As Lewis walks through a gallery filled with skeletons from Earth’s past, he reflects on the world we humans are born into. Considering the inevitable demise of organic life, he concludes, “Nature is a sinking ship.”

This setting, including the museum’s statue of Charles Darwin, provides the context for Lewis to explore the argument from design. As we look at the apparent design that we find in Nature, can we conclude that there must be a loving God? Given all the pain and suffering in the world, Lewis decided that the evidence pointed in the opposite direction.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Lewis would later find evidence for the Divine in our reason, our perception of beauty, our longing for something more and our morality. Where besides Nature do you see evidence for God?

LOOK DEEPER

Near the end of this scene, Lewis raises a second question: If the universe is so bad, or even half so bad, how did humans ever attribute it to the work of a wise and good creator? If not from Nature, where did our idea of a loving God come from?

3. “I lost my mother to cancer, had an estranged relationship with my father... and was in the trenches during the Great War.”

Some people have the mistaken impression that Lewis did not experience the ordinary pains of life. He did. As we learn from the film, Lewis lost his mother at a young age and had a complicated relationship with his father. He was sent to a series of dreadful boarding schools and later became wounded in World War I.



*The horrors of the trenches in World War I led C.S. Lewis (Nicholas Ralph) to question God's goodness, in *The Most Reluctant Convert: The Untold Story of C.S. Lewis*.*

FOR DISCUSSION

- In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis asks why a loving, all-powerful God allows so much suffering in the world. Has this been a question you have wondered about? What do you think the answer might be?

LOOK DEEPER

In the foreword to *Jack's Life* by Douglas Gresham, Christopher Mitchell makes this observation: “One of the most persistent misconceptions about the man C.S. Lewis is that for the greater part of his life he lived safely cloistered away from the typical cares and burdens of normal everyday life... Such a portrayal is troubling simply because it is not true. In fact, anyone who knows the facts knows that it is far from the truth.”

4. “The great loss that befell our family.”

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis reports that he hopes to correct “one or two false notions that seem to have got about.” There was speculation that his mother’s death had affected Lewis’ religious beliefs. Near the end of chapter one, he sets the record straight, explaining: “My mother’s death was the occasion of what some (but not I) might regard as my first religious experience.”

Flora Lewis died of cancer when Lewis was nine. The failure of Lewis’ prayers for her recovery did not produce a loss of belief because there was no genuine belief there in the first place. Lewis did not view God as Savior or even as Judge but merely as a sort of Magician who – if asked properly – would grant a request. After a proper request, the young Lewis expected this genie-like Magician to go back into his bottle until needed again.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you think Lewis is alone in viewing God as more of a genie than Lord? What are some ways that you have misunderstood who God is?

LOOK DEEPER

Lewis ends chapter one of *Surprised by Joy* with this passage that is used in the film: “With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life... It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.” Later in life, Lewis found new security but not because life became secure; faith in God made it possible to find happiness despite loss. How has your faith helped you weather the losses in your life?

5. “At fourteen I ceased to be a Christian.”

In chapter four of *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis begins his account of the new school he is attending by telling us that he made his first real friends there. Then he announces, “But there, too, something far more important happened to me.” What could be more important than making friends? Lewis tells us: “I ceased to be a Christian.”

Lewis reports, “Little by little I became an apostate” in this section of the film. One of the biggest factors in Lewis’ loss of faith was the lack of guidance from older, mature Christians. Left on his own to struggle with life’s big questions, Lewis stumbled out of faith and into serious atheism that lasted until his early thirties.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you think Lewis is fair to attribute his loss of faith to a lack of mature Christians present in his life? How have older Christians helped guide you in your faith journey?

LOOK DEEPER

Here Lewis says that he became an apostate not all at once or dramatically but little by little. In letter twelve of *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape explains, “Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”



Along Oxford's beautiful Addison's Walk, C.S. Lewis (Nicholas Ralph, right) and his friend J.R.R. Tolkien (Tom Glenister) discuss Jesus as the myth that became fact in *The Most Reluctant Convert: The Untold Story of C.S. Lewis*.

6. “One of the worst acts of my life.”

On Sunday, December 6, 1914, Lewis went home to St. Mark's in Belfast to commit what he confesses to being one of the worst acts of his life. Fearing to speak up against his father's wishes, Lewis, who was now sixteen and a staunch atheist, was confirmed as a member of the Church of Ireland. Cowardice drove him into hypocrisy, he reports in *Surprised by Joy*, and hypocrisy into blasphemy.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Lewis found it hard to admit his lack of faith to his father. Have there been times when you struggled to admit a realization about your faith to family members?

LOOK DEEPER

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis states it would have been impossible to explain why he did not want to be confirmed. His father would have resorted to arguing the beauty of the Authorized Version of the Bible, the beauty of Christian tradition, sentiment and character. Why is it hard to argue with the beauty of the Christian tradition? Is there something about beauty that draws people in ways rational arguments do not?

7. “I call this desire Joy.”

In this scene, Lewis introduces his concept of Joy – always spelled with a capital “J” – a longing for something just out of reach. Lewis would later recognize this unsatisfied desire as a longing for Heaven.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Have you ever had an experience of what Lewis calls Joy? If so, how would you describe it?
- In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis makes this claim which is heard later in the film: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.” How would you respond?

LOOK DEEPER

In *the Problem of Pain*, Lewis offers this observation about Joy: “Tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it should really become manifest...you would know it. Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say, ‘Here at last is the thing I was made for.’”

8. “It was here I discovered Chesterton.”

Lewis arrived at the front line in France on November 29, 1917 – his nineteenth birthday. Two months later he came down with trench fever and was sent to the hospital where he picked up a book by G.K. Chesterton, who would become a lasting influence in his life.

FOR DISCUSSION

- It seemed as though by chance that Lewis picked up a book by Chesterton. Can you think of a time when “chance” played a significant role in your life?

LOOK DEEPER

You may have heard it said that someone who wishes to remain a sound Christian should be careful of his reading. Looking back on the events of his life in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis turns this around and writes: “A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading.”

9. “Do you believe that logic and reason bring forth indisputable truth?”

In the film, Lewis considers how we can trust our minds if all knowledge and thought is merely the accidental by-product of atoms colliding inside our skulls. This question is at the heart of the argument from reason.



Nicholas Ralph – the breakout star of PBS Masterpiece’s *All Creatures Great and Small* – plays C.S. Lewis as a young man, who earned a rare “triple first” at Oxford then was admitted as a fellow in *The Most Reluctant Convert: The Untold Story of C.S. Lewis*.

FOR DISCUSSION

- If physical matter is all there is and human life simply results from random chance, then our thoughts are just chance arrangements of atoms inside our heads. Lewis said he could no more believe this about his thoughts than he could scratch his ear with his big toe. What about you?
- After abandoning Materialism, Lewis went through several stages on his way to believing in God. The first step was a philosophy called Idealism, where he believed in something he called the Absolute. Have you gone through stages on your journey of faith? If so, how would you describe them?

LOOK DEEPER

Lewis did not invent the argument from reason. In a 1946 letter written to *Oxford Magazine*, he refers to it as a “venerable philosophical chestnut” and comments that there are “more classical forms of the argument than mine.” Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy* presents one version of the argument from reason. Philosopher Alvin Plantinga is currently doing work in this area.

10. “Rum thing, looks as if it really happened once.”

In the diary entry for April 27, 1926, Lewis notes that a colleague named Weldon, who taught philosophy, stopped by his rooms for a chat that went late into the night. “We somehow got on the historical truth of the Gospels,” Lewis records. This conversation appears to be the one Lewis refers to in *Surprised by Joy*, where he describes a visit from a militant skeptic who remarked, “All that stuff of Frazer’s about the Dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it had really happened once.”

FOR DISCUSSION

- For some people, evidence for the truth of the Gospels plays a significant role in their acceptance of Christ. For some, a personal encounter with Jesus plays a central role. Others come to faith through both. What about you?

LOOK DEEPER

Lewis' late-night conversation with Weldon, coming as it did in 1926, did not at this point lead directly to his acceptance of Christianity and that final step did not happen until five years later in 1931. So why does Lewis include this episode here among the steps that led him to believe in Theism? This admission coming from this particular person forced Lewis to reexamine his position on what he thought was possible.

11. "I chose to unbuckle."

The next step after Lewis' acceptance of a philosophical God occurred in an unlikely place – on the bus as he was going home. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis writes that before the bus ride ended, he had chosen to open, unbuckle and loosen the rein. These are metaphors but ones that suggest Lewis had been doing the opposite. Through an act of will, he had been closed off to something he wanted to keep at bay and had kept a tight rein on where philosophical investigation might lead. He decided to be open to the truth on the bus ride home no matter where it might go. And once Lewis let go of the reins, truth would take him to only one place.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Has there been a time when you decided to let go of the reins and follow the truth wherever it took you?

LOOK DEEPER

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis tells us that God would not close in on him without permission. On the bus ride up Headington Hill, Lewis gave permission. We find a similar scene in chapter eleven of *The Great Divorce* where the angel asks the man with the red lizard for his permission to kill the thing that has been holding him back. Only after the man says yes does the angel act.

12. "What I found appalled me, depth after depth..."

Early in *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape offers Wormwood the following advice to keep his human out of Heaven: "You must bring him to a condition in which he can practice self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house

with him or worked in the same office.” Earlier in life, Lewis had been in this situation – a condition where he could not see his flaws. Now when he examines himself, his failings are visible, and what he sees appalls him.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Have you ever been unable to see your own flaws? Why is it easier for us to see the speck in someone else’s eye than the plank in our own?

LOOK DEEPER

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace can finally see how dragonish he has been. Desiring to change, Eustace – who has turned into a dragon— sheds the superficial layers of his dragon nature somewhat easily, without much pain or help. The deeper layers will be just the opposite. Eustace finds they are impossible to remove on his own. He cannot undragon himself and will need Aslan to do it for him.



C.S. Lewis (Max McLean) reflects on his spiritual journey in The Most Reluctant Convert: The Untold Story of C.S. Lewis.

13. “You may as well talk about the mouse’s search for the cat.”

Some people talk about their search for God. For Lewis, it was very much the other way around. God was searching for him, and Lewis, who above all wanted to be left alone, did not like it – not at the time.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Did you ever have the feeling that God was searching for you? Did you like this feeling?
- In this scene, Lewis wonders whether God will be reasonable in his demands. Have you ever worried about whether God would be reasonable with you?

LOOK DEEPER

The British author Francis Thompson wrote a famous poem titled “The Hound of Heaven” in which the Divine relentlessly pursues the protagonist in the form of a great hound. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis writes of “the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.”

14. “The most dejected and reluctant convert.”

In this scene we come to one of the most famous lines Lewis ever penned: “In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed, perhaps that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”

Lewis did not remain a dejected and reluctant convert but became a joyous Christian who was known for his laughter. This conversion, as Lewis explains, was to Theism, not Christianity. Lewis will later describe his conversion to Christianity in a very different way – neither dejected nor reluctant, but like someone who after a long sleep becomes aware that he is now awake.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Here Lewis finally admits that God is God, but he does so kicking, struggling, resentful, darting his eyes in every direction looking for a chance to escape. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis points to the Divine love that will accept a convert even on such terms. Why do you think God is willing to do this?

LOOK DEEPER

Alister McGrath argues that Lewis may have got the date wrong here and that his conversion to Theism took place in Trinity Term of 1930, not 1929. You can find his reasoning in chapter six of his biography of Lewis.

15. “Either this man was and is the Son of God or else he is a liar, a lunatic or a fraud.”

This scene comes from *Mere Christianity* where Lewis writes: “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell.”

FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you know someone who believes that Jesus was nothing more than a great moral teacher? If so, what is your response to them?
- Do you agree with Lewis' statement that Jesus is either the Son of God or else he is a liar, a lunatic or a fraud?

LOOK DEEPER

This passage from *Mere Christianity* is often called the Liar, Lunatic, Lord Trilemma. Some people mistakenly suggest that Lewis seems to have missed a fourth possibility – that Jesus was only a legend who never said these things at all. Notice that Lewis begins with accepting that Jesus was a great moral teacher, not just a myth that various people made up.



C.S. Lewis' (Nicholas Ralph, center) discussing Jesus as liar, lunatic or Lord with J.R.R. Tolkien (Tom Glenister, left) and Hugo Dyson (David Shields) in *The Most Reluctant Convert: The Untold Story of C.S. Lewis*.

16. “Like a man after a long sleep becomes aware he is now awake.”

When Lewis set out with his brother for Whipsnade zoo, he did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. When they arrived, he did. Lewis tells us in *Surprised by Joy* that he did not spend the journey in thought or great emotion, but it was more like when a man who has been sleeping a long time becomes aware that he is now awake.

FOR DISCUSSION

- People come to faith in many different ways – some as a result of great emotion, some as a result of great thought, and Lewis after a ride to the zoo. What was your experience of coming to faith like?

LOOK DEEPER

In his *Memoir of C. S. Lewis*, Warnie describes his brother's acceptance of Christ this way: “This seemed to me no sudden plunge into a new life, but rather a slow steady convalescence from a deep-seated spiritual illness of long standing.”

17. “There are no ordinary people.”

“There are no *ordinary* people. You have never met a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat.” These words in the film come from “The Weight of Glory,” Lewis’ most famous sermon, preached in Oxford on June 8, 1941, at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin.

FOR DISCUSSION

- How does the Christian belief that all humans are created in the image of God support Lewis’ statement that there are no ordinary people or mere mortals?

LOOK DEEPER

Lewis prefaces his claim that there are no ordinary people or mere mortals with these words:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.

CONCLUSION

The film ends with Lewis joining his fellow parishioners to receive communion, culminating his return to belief. Over the next three decades, Lewis would work tirelessly to assist others in their journey of faith – writing books, speaking on the BBC and sending personal replies to the hundreds of people who wrote to him for help.

What was it that led C.S. Lewis to spend so much time and energy and risk his scholarly reputation and comfortable academic life trying to encourage those who believed and reach out to those who did not?

One answer is found in the depth to which Lewis truly believed the statement we hear near the end of the film – that every day, to some degree, we are helping those around us to one eternal destination or the other.

May Lewis’ commitment to sharing the Gospel and the story of his life inspire our own.

Devin Brown, Professor of English at Asbury University and author of A Life Observed: A Spiritual Biography of C. S. Lewis.