Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer
C. S. Lewis
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One of Lewis’ earliest and best-known works, The Screwtape Letters, is written in the form of a series of letters that give the reader half of a conversation. One of Lewis’ last and least-known works also takes this form. Instead of letters from a junior tempter to an elder devil, Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer takes the form of letters from Lewis to a (fictional) friend on the subject of prayer. Lewis had started to write a book on prayer for “babes in the faith” a decade earlier, but struggled with it and set it aside. In that intervening decade before returning to and finishing the book, Lewis lost his wife and saw his own health decline. The book gives the impression that he is sharing lessons on prayer that he has learned firsthand, at a time he knows to be near the end of his life. Lewis died later the same year, and Letters to Malcolm was published posthumously.

Malcolm contains examples of Lewis’ brilliantly clear style and quotable lines such as “Joy is the serious business of heaven.” Why then isn’t the book more popular? The answer may be that Lewis answers thorny questions about prayer using an ontology that modern evangelicals will struggle to understand, much less embrace. Lewis’ answers are worth the difficulty and thought, even for readers who ultimately disagree with him.

If God is not in time, how could temporal prayer lead God to take some temporal action in the world? Most poignantly, why do the prayers born out of our greatest need and darkest moments seem to fall on deaf ears? Lewis answers these questions with a series of meditations on the nature of creation itself. He rejects both Pantheism, in which the nature and God are fully one, and Deism, in which nature and God are fully separated. A proper balance requires that to Pantheists one must emphasize the independence of creation, but that for Deists, “one must emphasize the divine presence in my neighbor, my dog, my cabbage-patch.”
If the divine presence is in us, prayer is, in a sense, God speaking to himself. Take this even further and it is part of the nature of all of creation for a timeless God to intersect with temporal creatures. Our reality is from him, and therefore the more real our prayer, the more it is his, but also the more it is ours. From this perspective, God does not reach into creation from the outside in order to answer prayers, but indwells creation so that not only the answer but the prayer itself is part of His symphony.

Of course, Lewis rejects pantheism, instead viewing creation as something intrinsically separate from God, as something “ejected.” He therefore has an explanation, if not a cure, for the creatures’ sense of alienation from God. It is the perfect man, he points out, who cried to God “Why hast thou forsaken me?” From this point of view we might imagine that there is naturally “an anguish, and alienation, a crucifixion involved in the creative act.” For Lewis, reality, and therefore prayer as part of reality, exists in this tension between isolation from the divine and immersion in it. Whether or not Lewis is correct, he prompts the reader to re-examine how esoteric-sounding questions about the nature of reality impact day-to-day experiences like prayer.

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