

Dear fellow pilgrims,

Greetings for Shrove Tuesday! Last week's chapter, entitled "The Perfect Penitent," was a Lewis *tour de force* as he beautifully and succinctly explained the whole concept of the Atonement. It is an especially appropriate selection to read as we prepare to enter the liturgical season of Lent tomorrow.

We also listened to an excerpt from Charles Wood's *St. Mark Passion* that incorporated the hymn "Sing My Tongue the Glorious Battle," written by the great Latin hymn writer Venantius Honorius Fortunatus in the 500s and sung to the beautiful and ancient Plainsong tune known as *Pange Lingua*. Wood's choral work was commissioned at the end of World War I by the Rev'd Eric Milner-White, Chaplain of King's College, Cambridge, who was also responsible for creating the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols which is now world-famous. I commend the *St. Mark Passion* to you as part of your Lenten devotions; the text is attached below.

In our review, we talked again about Lewis's "liar, lunatic, Lord" trilemma and discussed that some more liberal scholars have attacked it based on their view that the four canonical Gospels are more legend than fact. Lewis vigorously resisted this view. A great resource on this topic if you are scuba diving is Dr. Peter Williams' excellent book "Can We Trust the Gospels?", which I heartily recommend (<https://www.amazon.com/Can-Trust-Gospels-Peter-Williams/dp/1433552957>)

The main points we covered last week are as follows:

Book 2, Chapter 4: The Perfect Penitent

A. The alternatives This man we are talking about either was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic, or something worse. Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God. God has landed on this enemy-occupied world in human form.

B. Why did Jesus come? He came to teach, of course; but [in] the New Testament you will find they are constantly talking about something different—about His death and His coming to life again. It is obvious that Christians think the chief point of the story lies here. They think the main thing He came to earth to do was to suffer and be killed.

C. The point of His dying and how that works. The central Christian belief is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. Many different theories have been held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work. . . . If you are tired and hungry a meal will do you good. But the modern theory of nourishment—all about the vitamins and proteins—is a different thing. People ate their dinners and felt better long before the theory of vitamins was ever heard of: and if the theory of vitamins is some day abandoned they will go on eating their dinners just the same. Theories about Christ's death are not Christianity: they are explanations about how it works. We believe that the death of Christ is just that point in history at which something absolutely unimaginable from outside shows through into our own world. And if we cannot picture even the atoms of which our own world is built, . . . we are not going to be able to picture this. Indeed, if we found that we could fully understand it, that very fact would show it was not what it professes to be—the inconceivable, the uncreated, the thing from beyond nature, striking down into nature like lightning.

D. What good is it if we don't understand it? A man can eat his dinner without understanding exactly how food nourishes him. A man can accept what Christ has done without knowing how it works. . . . We are told that Christ was killed for us, that His death has washed out our sins, and that by dying He disabled death itself. That is Christianity. Any theories we build up as to how Christ's death did all this are quite secondary: mere plans or diagrams to be left alone if they do not help us, and, even if they do help us, not to be confused with the thing itself.

E. Some points worth considering Any theories we build up as to how Christ's death did all this are, in my view, quite secondary: mere plans or diagrams to be left alone if they do not help us, and, even if they do help us, not to be confused with the thing itself. All the same, some of these theories are worth looking at.

--The one most people have heard is the one I mentioned before—the one about our being let off because Christ had volunteered to bear a punishment instead of us. Now on the face of it that is a very silly theory. If God was prepared to let us off, why on earth did He not do so? And what possible point could there be in punishing an innocent person instead? None at all that I can see, if you are thinking of punishment in the police-court sense.

--**Paying the debt** On the other hand, if you think of a debt, there is plenty of point in a person who has some assets paying it on behalf of someone who has not. Or if you take "paying the penalty," not in the sense of being punished, but in the more general sense of "standing the racket" or "footing the bill," then, of course, it is a matter of common experience that, when one person has got himself into a hole, the trouble of getting him out usually falls on a kind friend.

--**The "hole" we are in** Now what was the sort of "hole" man had got himself into? He had tried to set up on his own, to behave as if he belonged to himself. In other words, fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realising that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor—that is the only way out of a "hole." This process of surrender—this movement full speed astern—is what Christians call repentance. Now repentance is no fun at all. It is something much harder than merely eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death. In fact, it needs a good man to repent.

--**The catch** And here comes the catch. Only a bad person needs to repent: only a good person can repent perfectly. The worse you are the more you need it and the less you can do it. The only person who could do it perfectly would be a perfect person—and he would not need it. Remember, this repentance, this willing submission to humiliation and a kind of death, is not something God demands of you before He will take you back and which He could let you off if He chose: it is simply a description of what going back to Him is like. If you ask God to take you back without it, you are really asking Him to let you go back without going back. It cannot happen. Very well, then, we must go through with it. But the same badness which makes us need it, makes us unable to do it.

--**How God can help us** Can we do it if God helps us? Yes, but what do we mean when we talk of God helping us? We mean God putting into us a bit of Himself, so to speak. He lends us a little of His reasoning powers and that is how we think: He puts a little of His love into us and that is how we love one another. When you teach a child writing, you hold its hand while it forms the letters: that is, it forms the letters because you are forming them. We love and reason because God loves and reasons and holds our hand while we do it. Now if we had not fallen, that would be all plain sailing. But unfortunately we now need God's help in order to do something which God, in His own nature, never does at all—to surrender, to suffer, to submit, to die. Nothing in God's nature corresponds to this process at all.

--**The road God had never walked** So that the one road for which we now need God's leadership most of all is a road God, in His own nature, has never walked. God can share only what He has: this thing, in His own nature, He has not. But supposing God became a man—suppose our human nature which can suffer and die was amalgamated with God's nature in one person—then that person could help us. He could surrender His will, and suffer and die, because He was man; and He could do it perfectly because He was God. You and I can go through this process only if God does it in us; but God can do it only if He becomes man. Our attempts at this dying will succeed only if we men share in God's dying, just as our thinking can succeed only because it is a drop out of the ocean of His intelligence: but we cannot share God's dying unless God dies; and He cannot die except by being a man. That is the sense in which He pays our debt, and suffers for us what He Himself need not suffer at all.

--**A serious misunderstanding** I have heard some people complain that if Jesus was God as well as man, then His sufferings and death lose all value in their eyes, "because it must have been so easy for him." Others may (very rightly) rebuke the ingratitude and ungraciousness of this objection; what staggers me is the misunderstanding it betrays. In one sense, of course, those who make it are right. They have even understated their own case. The perfect submission, the perfect suffering, the perfect death were not only easier to Jesus because He was God, but were possible only because He was God. But surely that is a very odd reason for not accepting them? The teacher is able to form the letters for the child because the teacher is grown-up and knows how to write. That, of course, makes it easier for the teacher, and only because it is easier for him can he help the child. If it rejected him because "it's easy for grown-ups" and waited to learn writing from another child who could not write itself (and so had no "unfair" advantage), it would not get on very quickly. If I am drowning in a rapid river, a man who still has one foot on the bank may give me a hand which saves my life. Ought I to shout back (between my gasps) "No, it's not fair! You have an advantage! You're keeping one foot on the bank"? That advantage—call it "unfair" if you like—is the only reason why he can be of any use to me. To what will you look for help if you will not look to that which is stronger than yourself? Such is my own way of looking at what Christians call the Atonement. But remember this is only one more picture. Do not mistake it for the thing itself: and if it does not help you, drop it.

Here is the link for class tomorrow, Wednesday, February 17, at 7:15 p.m. ET--please feel free to share the link with any friends who may be interested:

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://zoom.us/j/99307536525>

I look forward to "seeing" you tomorrow in class on Zoom!

Further up and further in,
Brian+

Music link from last week to Wood's *St. Mark Passion*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHE4qS-LDmA>. The entire text of this composition is included below. It lasts around an hour, and I commend it to you to listen and contemplate as part of your Lenten devotions.

Video link to last week's class:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsNrWvWCUDs>

Podcast link:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/episode-13-book-2-chapter-4-the-perfect-penitent/id1537579476?i=1000508629130>

Audio on church website link:

<https://www.stphilipchurchsc.org/mere-christianity-/episode/2021-02-10/episode-13book-2-chapter-4:-the-perfect-penitent>